弟弟



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Brother
[ENG TRANS] 弟弟 BY 人體骨架



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Synopsis (online)

Xu Ping's little brother is a retard.
But this stupid brother only has eyes for his older brother.



Back cover blurb (published):

Love suffers long *and* is kind;
Love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;
Does not behave rudely, does not seek its own,
Is not provoked, thinks no evil;
Does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never fails.

–1 Corinthians 13:4-8

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Book 1

One



Xu Ping's dad passed away.

The man had laryngeal cancer and was only diagnosed in the advanced stage. The surgery had only lasted fifteen minutes. The surgeon made an incision on his neck and poked around before sewing it right back up. The cancer cells had already spread to the lungs and nose cavity. The removal of infected organs was no longer a viable solution because the patient would not have lasted long after such a procedure.

The doctor took off his mask and said to Xu Ping who was waiting outside, "I'm sorry."

It took Xu Ping a while before understanding. He accepted it calmly. "How much longer does he have?"

The doctor was surprised by his easy attitude. "Six months at the most."

Xu Ping wondered how many deaths the tumour surgeon had to face every year to be able to announce the ultimate death of the patient to their family without batting an eyelash. Although his rational side told him that this man was a doctor and he could not blame his dad's illness on a stranger, his emotional side could not help but feel hatred towards the news breaker.

The two stood in silence.

"If you could excuse me, I still have other patients to attend to." The doctor broke the awkward pause.

“Yes, of course. I just need a minute to myself,” Xu Ping said with reddening eyes as he tried to control himself.

On the way to what would be the last meeting with his dad, Xu Ping passed by a flowering tree of which he did not know the name. It was blooming with tiny white flowers growing in tight-knit bundles like clouds lost in the mortal world.

He stood under the tree with his hands clasped behind his back as he watched the baby green leaves turn the noon sun into gold glitter.



Xu Ping was thirty-five that year. He worked as an editor for an up-and-coming publishing house. His workload consisted of reading the received material, finding the able writers and polishing them up. The pay was average but the satisfaction that came with it was not measurable by currency.

Xu Ping’s dad was a veteran actor, Xu Chuan, who enjoyed wide recognition. The building across from Xu Ping’s office still sported his advertisement for stomach medication on its wall. His hair was dashed with grey but he looked lively. Sometimes when Xu Ping would sneak a tea break and look out the windows, he would see old ladies walking with canes stop in their paths just to gawk at his dad’s advertisement.

There weren’t many in the publishing house that knew Xu Ping’s family background, the only one being his boss and good friend, chief editor, Wang Zedong. His friend had been surprised and studied Xu Ping’s face closely.

“You’ve got to be kidding. You look nothing like Xu Chuan.”

Xu Ping chuckled, knowing that he wasn’t good looking. He didn’t argue with his boss. “You’ll see when you meet my brother.”

Xu Ping had a younger brother, Xu Zheng.

“I’ve been hearing about this brother of yours for so long,” Wang Zedong began to complain, “But you never once introduced him to me. What are you doing hiding him away?”

Xu Ping did not take the bait and started talking about the publishing house’s budget for the first period.

For the past few months, Xu Ping had been leaving his office building at twelve-thirty sharp, walking three blocks and crossing one overpass to visit his father at the city hospital.

He had rushed past this tree every single day without ever stopping once.

On this day, however, he saw the bursting energy that this tree harboured under the sunlight. He was absolutely in awe.

The abundance of life hit him in the face like a fist and made his body burn.

Xu Ping found a young labour worker squatting by the road and handed him twenty yuan.

“Get me a branch from that tree.”

The young fellow looked at Xu Ping and the tree with a frown and stayed squatting. “I’ll get fined.”

Xu Ping pushed at his glasses. “I’ll give you twenty more.”

Forty yuan to climb a tree? That was a good deal. The young man threw his cigarette butt on the ground and asked, “How many you want? I’m chargin’ extra for more.”

Xu Ping arrived at the hospital with a branch dotted with pinkish-white flowers and a bag of apples.

His dad looked very good that day. Xu Ping stuck the branch in a vase and placed the vase by the bed. His dad even smiled at him.

Compared with the average-looking Xu Ping, his dad had a handsome face that not even old age could spoil.

His dad had been an actor his whole life, a supporting role if there ever was one. When he was young, square-set jaws and bold

brows were in. Wide shoulders and a broad frame in general were desired for a Herculean effect. He was so good-looking, however, that he had the bad-boy aura instead. When it came time for the distinctive cutie-type to gain popularity, like Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok and Edison Chen, he was already an old man.

Xu Ping grabbed a chair to sit by the bed and started peeling an apple for him.

The sickly man kept his eyes on his elder son.

He was so skinny that he was practically all bone and the veins jutted out along his arm. Eating and speaking had become extremely painful because of the cancer. Despite this frail state, not a single hair was out of place on his head.



Xu Ping cut the apple into small pieces and placed them on a plate before helping him up. The man took one piece, chewed it and swallowed it painstakingly. After, he nodded at his son with a smile, meaning it was good.

Xu Ping took out today's paper and asked in a gentle voice, "Why don't I read the paper for you, Dad?"

He nodded.

It was May 17th, 2006, a day of sunshine and peace. The paper was filled with insignificant news, as though the world was free from disasters and accidents on this day. The King of Cambodia was visiting China again. Tokyo was going to host an international summit next month. A Polish writer had been translated and published in Chinese for the first time.

He listened quietly while lying on the bed.

His throat started to hurt by the time Xu Ping finished every column. Xu Ping folded the paper back and talked about work and his brother. He stayed at the hospital in the afternoons and not much can happen in twenty-four hours, so he finished fairly quickly.

The two sat across from each other, wordless.

Xu Ping asked after scanning around, “Do you want some water, Dad?”

His dad shook his head. Xu Ping’s own throat was so dry it could catch on fire, but he held back.

When Xu Ping finally broke the silence, he said, “I was thinking, why don’t I bring *Xiao*[1]-Zheng along to visit tomorrow?”

After some thought, his dad slowly shook his head.

It was clear what his dad wanted. He didn’t want *Xiao*-Zheng to come to the hospital.



Xu Ping opened his mouth to speak but let it go in the end.

“Then I’ll come by myself tomorrow.” Xu Ping took a look at his watch and got up to leave.

His dad made a writing motion with his right hand. Xu Ping took out a pen and paper from his bag.

With a shaking hand, his dad wrote:

“Don’t abandon your brother.”

Xu Ping felt a sting in his nose and tears threatened to burst forth.

“What are you saying, Dad. He’s my brother. I’d never just leave him!”

His dad wrote another line.

“Don’t tell him. He doesn’t understand.”

Don’t tell him. Don’t tell him what?

Xu Ping felt terrified but did not dare show it on his face. He nodded furiously, “Don’t worry, Dad.”

“Is there anything else you’d like for me to do?” he inquired softly.

His dad shook his head and handed the pen and paper back to Xu Ping. He patted Xu Ping’s right hand and tried to raise his hand higher, but he hadn’t the strength to.

[1] A prefix to express familiarity and the higher status of the speaker

Xu Ping held his bony hand up to his face.

Their fingers were of the same shape and size. The knuckles protruded a little and the index finger was longer than usual.

Xu Ping thought, this really is my dad. We share the same blood. The creator even made my hand to look exactly like his.

But this man is about to die.

Unable to fight back the emotions, he let out a cry, “Dad!”

His dad pulled a smile and winked at Xu Ping.

An actor his whole life, he no longer needed language to speak.

What he said was, “Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow, son.”



Two



1983

Xu Ping ended late today because the class meeting of year six division three at Railroads No.1 Elementary went overtime.

He packed up and when he rushed out of the classroom, he ran straight into Lu Jia. Usually, the boys would get into a fight but today the homeroom teacher, Mrs. Li, was in the hallway. Lu Jia only made a disdainful snort and pushed past him.

Lu Jia had just been scolded by the teacher at the meeting. He was often late to class and the first to leave. He chitchatted during self-study time and even copied homework. The teacher made him reflect on his wrongs in front of the class.

Lu Jia glared daggers at Xu Ping when he stepped down from the podium as if to say, "Just you wait, you little shit!"

Xu Ping didn't even bother to care.

He was busy wondering how long the meeting was going to continue and worrying that Xu Zheng would get impatient.

As he ran home, he passed by the book stand where his schoolmates had gathered. He remembered that today was the release of book five of *Heroes of Sui and Tang*[2], but he didn't have the time to buy it now.

[2] A comic book series.

He opened the door with the key around his neck to find the eight-year-old Xu Zheng on a chair by the window with his legs tucked into his chest.

"Okay, let's go," the sweaty Xu Ping said to his brother without even stopping for a drink.

Xu Zheng glanced at the wall clock and then at his brother. He pouted. "Five-thirty."

Xu Ping wiped the sweat on his forehead. "I got held up in class. I didn't mean to.

"Five-thirty!" Xu Zheng repeated loudly.

Xu Ping took a glimpse at the clock and shrugged. "Yeah, we're thirty minutes late."

"Sandbox time is five o'clock!"

If this were any other person, even Xu Ping's dad, Xu Ping would have lost his temper by now.

But Xu Zheng was a different story.

He was a special child.

Xu Ping tried to suppress his anger. "We can go at five-thirty, too. Come on."

Xu Zheng sat there hugging his knees and shouted to the ceiling, "Five o'clock! Not five-thirty!"

Xu Ping was about to lose it. Who even bothered with these minute details? It was just sand. "What's the difference between five and five-thirty?"

Xu Zheng looked at his brother. "You said. Five o'clock. Sandbox time!" He tapped his own head. "You said. I remember!"

Xu Ping was angry now. He knew his brother had a mild deficiency but had never found him this immature and annoying. "Well, now I say five-thirty is sandbox time, alright? Are you going or not? I still have homework to do!"

They engaged in tug-of-war with their eyes.

Xu Ping didn't back down. He was twelve already, well past the age to play with sand. If not for this retard brother of his, he would be participating in extracurricular activities, not going to the sandbox at five every single day!

Xu Zheng jumped down from the chair with his head hanging low, and he pulled out a red metal bucket from under the table. Inside were a shovel and a ball.

Going to the sandbox at five everyday was Xu Zheng's daily chore. His brother had promised him. They had even pinky swore and everything. He remembered it perfectly.

His brother was the bad one!

The more he thought about it, the more aggrieved he felt. He dragged the bucket noisily along the ground.

Xu Ping was so baffled by this he could laugh.

This brat! If he wasn't my brother, and if my brother wasn't a retard, I'd…I'd…

Xu Ping didn't know how to finish that thought, but he did know that his life would be a hundred times better without his brother holding him back. He could join extracurricular activities like other kids, read comics afterschool, attend the spring and autumn fieldtrips, and most importantly, he wouldn't have to suffer the talk behind his back from his classmates.

"Xu Ping is the retard's brother."

Xu Ping felt a slap on his face from the burning shame whenever he heard that.

Xu Zheng was still dragging the bucket out the door while Xu Ping had already turned and headed down the stairs.

The bucket wasn't light by any means, and Xu Zheng could not carry it for long. Usually, Xu Ping would help him carry it with a frown, but today he merely watched from the corner of his eye his dumb brother shuffling along with great effort. He felt a sudden

burst of fury and yelled, “What are you doing? Get a move on! Do you still want to go or not!”

Xu Zheng kept his head down in silence.

Xu Ping likely would have given in if he could have whined a little like a normal eight year old, or maybe complain about the bucket being too heavy for him.

But Xu Zheng didn’t. He didn’t know how to. Even if he did, he wouldn’t. He was angry at his brother too, as much as Xu Ping was angry at him. He dragged the bucket along, hitting it on each step as he came down, filling the stairwell with clanging.



Seeing his brother acting up, Xu Ping only became more enraged. He scoffed and walked ahead.

The two brothers arrived at the sandbox in the courtyard. It used to be filled with kids play fighting and throwing bean bags, and such. Recently, the Informatics Centre next door relocated and the building had yet to be demolished. The neighbourhood children began to play there instead.

Xu Ping swung his army green bag off his shoulder and plopped down under the shade of a tree.

It was September but the Indian summer was vicious. The ground was baked by the sun and it took some wiggling around for Xu Ping to find a comfortable spot.

He took out his workbook from the bag. The assignment today was a six hundred word essay. The topic was “My cute ___” and the student could insert a person or animal in the blank, such as “brother,” “sister,” “kitten,” or “puppy.”

Speak of the devil! Xu Ping just about poked a hole in the page with his pencil.

Only then did Xu Zheng shuffle past him with the bucket. There was a huge, purple bloody bruise on his knee that made his skin look pale and sickly. He was wearing a red tank top with a pair of blue

shorts that was faded from the numerous washes and a pair of grey sandals, and he sported a buzz cut on his head.

Xu Ping looked down and pretended to work on his assignment.

Mom died early. Dad was often away because of the performances of the Cultural Troupe[3]. As for his only brother…

Xu Ping crossed out the possibility of "My cute brother" with a giant red marker in his mind.

What about cats or dogs? Xu Ping resorted to animals.

But they never had a pet.



Xu Ping had once found a litter of kittens abandoned by their mother in a rumpled cardboard box on the brink of starving. He brought them home and tried to feed them congee, but the kittens wouldn't eat it and only kept mewling. He held each of them dear in his arms and petted them affectionately. However, his dad threw the three pitiful creatures out when he came home from work that night, regardless how much Xu Ping pleaded.

"What kind of brother are you? Don't you know your brother is allergic to cat fur?!"

Xu Ping even had a crying session because of this without anyone knowing.

His retard brother had always been the most important. He had to remember that he was, before anything else, "Xu Zheng's brother".

Xu Ping wondered what had happened to those cats afterward as he stuck the pencil behind his ear like smokers do with their cigarette. They probably died of hunger the next day after getting thrown out.

[3] This is a part of the army whose duty was to provide entertainment for the army and to promote patriotic spirit among the public.

But he couldn't write about that in his essay. Though no one in particular taught him, he knew that the ugly and the painful could not be written even if it was the truth.

Mom died.

Dad threw away the kittens.

I hate my brother.

Who would want to see that? And if his dad found out, he would get some quality time with the belt too.

The teacher said, they must aim for the sky and be positive.

For instance, the essays written by fellow elementary school kids in the book, "Essay King" that he bought, nine out of ten began with "It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky" as though it never rained and snowed in the year.

Xu Ping brought the pencil from his left ear to his right, then from his right to his left. Even then, his page remained blank.

He glanced over at his brother.

Xu Zheng was engrossed with the sand. He shovelled sand into the bucket, packed it in tightly, and then turned the bucket upside down to leave a pillar of sand.

Frankly, Xu Ping didn't see the fun in doing this, but Xu Zheng could do the same movements over and over for minutes, even hours, until all the sand was gone.

Xu Ping puckered his lips and returned to staring aimlessly at the sky.

He got glared at by Lu Jia at the class meeting. Lu Jia was always a spiteful child and they still had bad blood between them from the incident with his little brother, Lu Xi. Now, there was another score to settle. Xu Ping thought as he rubbed his nose.

Lu Jia lived in the same complex and attended the same elementary. His brother, Lu Xi, was a year younger than Xu Zheng and was in year two at the school. He had tiny eyes and a flat nose, but was a clever kid who always had a smile on his face. He greeted

everyone dearly and had a mouth as sweet as honey. When New Year's came along, he received more red pockets[4] than any other kid.

Now, Xu Zheng, on the other hand, had adorable looks but had mush for brains. He either hid from people or stood there like a dummy, unwilling to speak even when pushed. Other than arguing with Xu Ping, Xu Zheng was a closed clam even with their father.

Xu Ping shot a disappointed look at his brother.

The oblivious target of which was still in the sandbox scooping sand into the bucket. His lateral profile resembled that of Xu Chuan, clearly defined with a tall nose. Only his eyes, however, were not as strong and slanted, but rather round and large. They made him look like a dumb and loyal puppy when they gazed at you.



Xu Ping fought back the shudders and turned away to relieve them.

How could a retard that always brought trouble be as cute as a puppy?!

He must have been mad!

As Xu Ping raged at himself, he stomped on the topic "My cute brother" until it fractured to bits and pieces.

Unable to come up with an essay topic, Xu Ping took out his knife and began sharpening his pencils.

He had five Chung Hwa pencils in his metal pencil case. The body was red and black, and it was topped with a pink eraser. "China Shanghai Chung Hwa Brand" was printed on the black side with a small golden mark.

Xu Ping organized them according to length on the ground from longest to shortest and shaved off the wooden chips like a gardener would his garden.

[4] Red pockets are monetary gifts given mainly during New Year's from adults to children.

He had long and strong fingers that curved upward at the tip. He was skilled with his hands and made even pencil sharpening look swift and graceful.

His homeroom teacher, Mrs. Li, had once said, "You must be good at taking care of others."

Xu Ping thought long and hard with a frown about how his teacher came to such a conclusion. The ultimate explanation was that his teacher had probably been fooled by his average face.

He actually was extremely impatient, had a bad temper and hated taking care of others.



Xu Ping flicked the shavings away and stood up for a stretch.

He wondered if the new volume of *Heroes of Sui and Tang* had been sold out yet.

The story had left off at the part where Cheng Yaojin[5] was taught how to use the war axe through a dream. He was taught three manoeuvres: the skull cracker, the jaw breaker and the neck chopper. These were extremely deadly and, with the first alone, he was able to take General Luo Fang's life and take back the tribute that Yang Lin made to the government, which led to his cousin, Qin Qiong, being asked to deal with him by the police.

He wondered as to what happened afterwards while he twisted his neck.

There were many others in his class who were addicted to these comics. The storylines were fresh and the illustrations were beautiful too, making the fight scenes extra exciting. It was one of the most unique of its kind and had the boys under its spell. They would go to the bookstand every other day to see if the new volume had arrived.

Just thinking about it made Xu Ping fidget with anxiety.

He wasn't going to make any progress with the essay so why not go to the bookstand while it was still light.

[5] Cheng Yaojin is a fictional character in many Chinese stories, notably *Heroes of the Marsh*.

He glanced at Xu Zheng in the sandbox.

Xu Zheng was only a third of the way through the sand, and since this was Xu Zheng, who was as flexible as metal, he wouldn't stop until the very last grain.

The mounds of sand that looked like ugly blemishes only annoyed Xu Ping.

He didn't understand Xu Zheng's life.

Xu Zheng would wake up at six-thirty every morning and be sent to school for the special by Xu Ping at seven-thirty. The teacher would bring him home at four-thirty and he would go to the sandbox with Xu Ping at five. After making thirty identical piles of sand, he would return home for supper. Shower would come after supper and bedtime was nine o'clock sharp. He would close his eyes and when they opened again, it would be the next day which would be the exact same as the day before.



What kind of life was that?

Xu Ping would find it hard to breathe and wanted to run from it, but everyday he would still go home afterschool and take his brother out to play.

He hated it!

He hated his idiotic brother but at the same time, he hated himself for being a wuss.

But Xu Zheng was like caramel that refused to come loose.

Xu Zheng wasn't close with anyone. Not even their dad could get a few words out of him. He only knew to hold on to Xu Ping, and only Xu Ping.

"Hey."

No one answered.

"*Xiao*-Zheng!"

Only after a long time did Xu Zheng turn his head around slowly to take one glance at him before returning to his sand.

“Stop playing. I’ll take you to the bookstand.”

Xu Zheng didn’t stop what he was doing.

“Are you listening?!”

Xu Zheng didn’t respond.

Xu Ping squashed a sand pile under his foot. “What’s wrong with you? Did you not hear me?!”

Xu Zheng slowly turned his head around, looking at the scattered sand for a while and then looking up at Xu Ping.

“I’m going to the bookstand. Are you coming?”

Xu Zheng turned back around and started shovelling faster. The shovel scraped the bucket, making clanging noises.

“He’s probably still mad at me,” Xu Ping thought.

He couldn’t be bothered. He packed up his bag and swung it over his shoulder.

“If you’re not coming then stay here and play with your sand, and I’ll come back for you later.” He added after a pause, “Don’t run off with strangers. I’ll bring you a popsicle when I come back.”

Xu Zheng didn’t speak.

“Did you hear me?” Xu Ping slapped his brother’s shoulder.

Xu Zheng turned his shoulder away.

“Yes!” he shouted angrily.

Xu Ping was far too excited for *Heroes of Sui and Tang* to care.

He reached into his pocket for the two yuan his dad left him before leaving. A popsicle cost five fen and the comic book was thirty-five fen.[6] That left him with…

Xu Ping calculated with his fingers as he skipped away merrily.

[6] The yuan is the unit of currency equivalent to the dollar. The fen is the unit equivalent to the cent or penny.

Three



If you were to jump the fence on the west side of the No. 1 Elementary, walk through an alley and past the Women's Alliance, you would find yourself at Xinmin Road.

This road would be renovated to several times its current width twenty years down the road. The white poplars would be cut down, the greenery instead placed in a narrow strip down the centre. The Women's Alliance would also be relocated and the building sold to the Japanese to build a department store. New, foreign brands filled the tall building – Prada, Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs – of which Xu Ping wouldn't even be able to afford one pant leg with his monthly paycheque as editor.

The Xinmin Road in 1983, however, was just another street in the city where poplars stood tall against the clear, baby blue sky. Cars were rare while bicycles made up nearly all of the traffic, evident from the amount of tinkling bells. The street was lined with a few restaurants, state-run stores and many vendors and stands. You could find everything from popsicles and tea eggs[7] to tailors sewing at a temporary folding table and a tent functioning as a bookstand selling comics.

[7] A savory snack. See below for information.

The twelve-year old Xu Ping sprinted from home so fast that his red scarf[8] flew over his shoulder. He pushed to the front of the crowd but before he could ask if *Heroes of Sui and Tang* had arrived, he was stopped by a holler.

"Oi, what's the big idea!"

He turned to find a dark, stocky boy beside him. It was none other than his classmate, He Zhi.

"Hey, *Da*[9]-Zhi! You're here too?"

"Xu Ping!"

The two gave up their spot in the front and backed away with He Zhi's arm around the smaller boy's neck.

"What you doin' here today? You're always running off right at the bell!"

"Don't remind me! I'm not supposed to be here. I need to go back soon."

He Zhi eyed him as he spoke.

Xu Ping didn't notice and continued to ask, "Did the fifth book come out?"

The bigger boy waved a book in the air. "I just got it." Then he added, "The last one."

"No way!" Xu Ping gasped. "You're lying!" With that, he pushed back into the crowd and, seconds later, came back, shoulders drooping.

"All sold out."

He Zhi chuckled. "All sold out."

Xu Ping was furious. "You took my book, you bastard!"

He Zhi shrugged. "You're the one who came too late."

Xu Ping had steam coming out of his ears. "Me? If I didn't have to–"

[8] A tradition from the Communist era. Young pioneers wore red scarves in the USSR, Vietnam, China and Cuba, while in China it has been incorporated into the public school uniform.

[9] A prefix that notes the relative size or status of the person. Da literally means big.

He stopped abruptly.

"Have to do what?"

"Nothing," Xu Ping sighed. "Whatever. I have to go home and practise the erhu."

He Zhi flashed a secretive smile. "C'mon, Ping-*zi*[10]. What's the rush? Tell me, is playin' with sand fun?"

It took Xu Ping a moment before jumping in rage. "How the fuck did you know?!"

He swore.

He Zhi was taken back as well. "Wait, so it's true?" He scratched his head. "I didn't take you to be…."

Xu Ping was seething with anger.

Someone else in his class had asked him before why he never did any activities after school. He had used "family matters" as an excuse for some time before lying about daily erhu lessons that his father had arranged for him. He was so embarrassed he was busted that he was angry. He seemed to have forgotten that He Zhi was a head taller than he was, and grabbed the boy's collar. "Who told you! Was it that fucking Lu Jia?! He's gonna get a piece of me!"

He Zhi peeled the smaller boy's hands off. "Hey, hey, use your words. I have a thing about people messing with my clothes."

This basically meant it was true.

Xu Ping plopped down on the curb with his head in his arms.

"Man, it's just playin' sand with your brother! Why the temper tantrum?" He Zhi sat down beside him, laughing. "We all got sibling troubles–"

"Shut up and go away." Xu Ping turned away and continued to brood.

"And here I was wondering why you always seem to get diarrhea before the class performance for Children's Day. And you

[10] A suffix that shows familiarity and usually higher status of the speaker.

know, my mom comes home praising you like you're some angel, said you were nice and quiet and good at writing and even knew how to play the erhu. To think that all these years I've been gettin' scolded for nothing, and here you are gettin' mad at me? What did I do to get this?"

"Well, you deserve it!"

"Oi! That's not very nice, now is it? I haven't even started on you yet!"

Xu Ping decided to skip the talk and dived for the book.

"Oi! Oi! What're you doing?! You're gonna tear it! Hey!"



Xu Ping was flipping through the new book of *Heroes of Sui and Tang* on the curb when He Zhi asked, "So what's up with you and Lu Jia?"

Xu Ping scoffed without even glancing up. "Just don't like him. That's what's up."

"Well, there must be a reason why you don't. I think he's alright, though."

Xu Ping didn't reply.

"Lu Jia said you beat his brother."

"Yeah, I did." Xu Ping turned the page as he read intently.

He Zhi looked over at him. "Isn't his brother only in year two?"

"Yup, Lu Xi, year two division one, sweet talker that everyone loves. He gets so much money during New Year's he probably gets sprains from counting it."

He Zhi didn't say anything but his expression clearly said: "How could you do that to a second grader!"

Xu Ping's eyes were on the page but he was thinking: "Goddamn, I went easy on him. Should've just beaten him to death!"

Xu Ping had seen Lu Xi throwing dirt on Xu Zheng behind the others' backs. Xu Zheng was dumb and slow to react. Lu Xi then

began giggling, holding his stomach laughing. After he finished laughing, he pushed the boy to the ground, shouting, “Retard!”

Xu Ping was standing in the shadows on the second floor balcony. The word “retard” seemed to poke holes into him like a knife.

Xu Ping didn’t bother to explain to He Zhi. He couldn’t either, since the other boy was the youngest in his family, the one who was babied.



Xu Ping stuffed the book into his own bag and dusted his butt while standing up. “Alright. I’d better head home now.”

He Zhi grabbed him. “My book!”

“I’m confiscating it because you’ve been misbehaving.”

“What do you mean misbehaving?” He Zhi shouted. “I haven’t even read a single page yet!”

Xu Ping remembered his promise to buy a popsicle for Xu Zheng and went over to the bicycle with a makeshift cooler in the back made from a wooden box and cotton cloth.

“I’ll give it back tomorrow.”

He Zhi considered it for a moment before negotiating, “Alright, if you buy me a popsicle.”

“Buy it yourself.” Xu Ping shrugged him off.

“With what? I spent it all on the book!” He said as he pulled out his pockets which were indeed empty.

Xu Ping replied as he rummaged for his cash. “Ask your sister for more.”

“She just got a job,” he explained sadly, “Thirty bucks a month. It’s not even enough for herself. Asking her for money would be like committing suicide.”

Xu Ping handed over a one yuan bill. “Two cream, please.”

“Wow.” He Zhi’s eyes popped out. “You’re rich, Ping-*zi*!”

“My dad went to Qinghai to perform. This is for when he’s away.” Xu Ping reached for the change and the two popsicles wrapped in green paper.

He Zhi’s eyes were glued to them like a poor dog looking at its favourite bone. “That’s so awesome. My dad never gives me allowance.”

Xu Ping gave in. “Alright, fine. What flavour do you like?”

“Cream!” He Zhi exclaimed with a jump.

Xu Ping handed another five cents. “Mister, be sure to give him chocolate.”

“Cool,” He Zhi laughed, “I like chocolate more.”

Damn it. Xu Ping realised he fell right into the taller boy’s trap!



Four



ONE CHILD PER COUPLE. QUALITY OVER QUANTITY FOR MODERNIZATION.

Xu Ping walked past the huge black letters on the bulletin board by the street while sucking on a popsicle. He was getting a brain freeze.

The sky had gotten darker, no longer a clear blue but a warm, fiery orange that burned the horizons.

People were heading home from work on their bicycles. Greetings were shouted and small talk quickly exchanged when two people saw a familiar face before their vehicles wheeled them apart again.

The blue and white coloured number four tram called “The Advancing Youth” came to a loud stop by the platform. The ticket lady poked her head out of the window and announced the next stop. Soon, passengers filled up the tram, and the doors slammed shut before the vehicle chugged along its path.

Xu Ping threw the remaining stick into the trash basket of a restaurant and took a big breath.

The mouth-watering smell of stir-fry was wafting in the air, entering his nostrils like magic.

He could almost hear his stomach rumbling.

Xu Zheng was probably done with playing with sand by now. He had better hurry back or else the popsicle was going to melt.

He ran for the courtyard with the cream popsicle in hand only to bump right into Mr. Zhang, his dad's colleague. The man had black, square glasses and a white Dacron[11] short sleeve shirt with a pen clipped on the breast pocket. He was parking his bicycle in the garage.

"Hello, Mr. Zhang."

"Oh, Xu Ping, you're out late. Where did you go?"

"I went to buy a popsicle for my brother." Xu Ping held it up accordingly.

Mr. Zhang didn't ask for more details and grabbed his black briefcase from the basket on the bicycle. "Come over later for dinner with Xu Zheng. Mrs. Zhang is making tofu tonight."

"Yes, sir." Xu Ping replied before racing off.

The sun had dropped below the horizon leaving only a dying glow.

Xu Ping stood by the deserted sandbox and scanned around.

Not a soul in sight.

He could hear the sound of frying pans and television. The seven o'clock news was going to start after the familiar melody.

"*Xiaoooooo*! Zhengggggg!"

Xu Ping's voice echoed out only to disappear like the ripples in a pond after a pebble falls in.

The popsicle had melted and was dribbling down the stick and onto his hand.

There were thirty neat piles of sand in the sandbox beside which there was Xu Zheng's red bucket, turned over.

Xu Ping threw the popsicle away and turned the bucket right side up.

Out fell half a piece of essay paper with a few scribbled words on it. Xu Ping read it in the dim twilight.

[11] A type of fabric that was a fashion symbol.

Xu Ping, come to the Informatics Centre!

That retard! I told him not to run off with strangers!

Xu Ping cursed in his head as he ran to the abandoned building.

God damn! What else is that brat good for other than causing trouble!

Xu Ping was writhing with annoyance but picked up his speed nonetheless.

The rubber soles of his canvas shoes slapped against the ground.

A tiny voice was saying inside:

You were the one who left your brother to read comics.

Xu Ping tripped and fell. His backpack flew a distance away and his palms were scraped bloody by the sand on the ground.

Ow! That hurt!

Xu Ping pushed himself back up, hissing in pain.

It's not my fault! I told him, and he said he heard me!

But…

If he's so stupid that he'll run off with anyone, he might as well just get kidnapped!

The voice inside slowly died down, not to be heard from again.

The sky got darker and darker. A slice of the moon and a few stars could be seen on the navy blue backdrop.

Mr. Zhang was going to come out looking for them if he didn't go over soon with Xu Zheng.

With that in mind, Xu Ping sprung to his feet and sprinted for the worn-down red brick building, not even bothering to pick up his backpack.

Xu Ping never really figured out what kind of information the Informatics Centre researched exactly.

The kids had often debated on this issue regarding the mysterious building that didn't even have an address. In the end,

they were swaying between invading Taiwan and defeating the Americans.

It was a time when every boy had an army green beret with a five-pointed star on his head and a red flag in hand. Even his blood seemed to broil with passion.

Xu Ping wasn't missing that burning passion, but he had to take care of that troublesome brother of his every day. What he was missing was the free time to play with friends and hope for a brighter tomorrow with that red flag in hand.

He entered the Informatics Centre. The China rose in the planter box had long dried out from a lack of care, leaving only dead, brown stems still standing.

There was broken glass everywhere, and every window he could see had a huge hole in it, from which the evening wind howled.

He heard Xu Zheng's cry coming from one of the rooms, followed by boys' snickering and talking.

"Hey, hurry up. The idiot keeps movin'. I can barely hold him down."

"Shut up! I took this Seagull[12] from my dad. He'd skin me alive if anything happened to it!"

"Just hurry up and take it."

Xu Ping sped after the sound.

"Okay. Do a pose."

"Make me look cool, eh." Then he added, "I want it to look like *The Heroes of Sui and Tang*."

"Alright, I got it. Don't just stand there."

The green paint was peeling off from the half-opened door. Xu Ping saw Xu Zheng being totally subdued by Lu Jia from behind. The light was behind them and he couldn't see their faces well.

[12] Seagull Camera, a Shanghai-based company that was the leading camera producer in China.

What the hell do they want? Xu Ping wondered. They want me to watch them take pictures of Xu Zheng?

Xu Ping was a bit confused.

He wanted to call out.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, big brother's here.

"I told you not to run off with strangers!

"*Xiao*-Zheng, time to go home for supper!"

From a place he couldn't see, a boy jumped out and kicked Xu Zheng in the face.



Time seemed to have stopped.

He saw his brother's tiny body fly out like a kite that was cut loose. The red tank top and pale blue shorts. The hands and feet as white and soft as snow.

Xu Zheng, the most annoying, most hated brother in the world.

Xu Zheng fell to the ground.

Xu Zheng was the reason why he couldn't participate in extracurricular activities, why he had lied to his teacher and classmates, ruining the fieldtrips every year.

Xu Zheng's body jerked a little in efforts to get up, but he failed to do so.

"Yo, how was that? Just like Li Yuanba[13], right? 'Cept for the two clubs."

Xu Zheng would only bother him. He needed to be fed his food, accompanied to sleep and even scrubbed in the shower.

Xu Zheng moved again, propping his elbows up in efforts to get up, but he fell right back down again.

"Did you get it?"

"I think so."

[13] A character in the comic that wields two clubs. See below for picture.

He was eight years old but was still so stupid that he couldn't learn anything. He had been sent home by the elementary school teacher not even half a term in. "We can't teach a child like this." Then, everybody knew – the teachers, the students – the news spread quicker than the wind! "Hey, did you hear? Xu Ping's brother is a retard."

Xu Zheng finally managed to sit up. His face was swollen and still had the dirt from the bottom of the boy's shoe.

"What do you mean, you think so?"

"You did it so fast. I don't know if the camera caught it or not."

"Then, let's do it again. You'd better get it this time."

"Got it."

This retard had a temper tantrum because Xu Ping was late but would only stand there like a dummy when he was truly being bullied. He was clearly in pain. Why didn't he cry? Why did he not cry?!

Xu Zheng sat on the ground, still, as blood oozed out from a cut on his calf. He faced the window, listening for a while, before suddenly speaking. "Seven o'clock. I have to go home."

Lu Jia dragged him up from the ground.

"Zhao Bo, you hold him down real good."

"But my photo…."

"It's my turn now."

Xu Zheng was the most annoying, most hated brother in the world.

Xu Ping thought as he picked up a broken table leg from the ground, eyes red, teeth clenched.

Five

"*I ain't going no[where] ...If I want to die, I'll die right here.*

–Muhammed Ali in *Ali* (2001)

Thump!

"Get up!

"Didn't you want to beat me up just now? What's wrong, you wimp? Can't take a few punches?

"Zhao Bo, pick this fucker up!

"You think I'd be scared of you and your little stick? In your fuckin' dreams!

"Oh, what? You're mute now? Cat's got your tongue? I thought you're so clever with your mouth, tellin' on me to the teacher, sayin' I'm always late and copying homework. It was you, wasn't it! Say it! C'mon!

"You hit my brother, didn't you?!

"Not talkin'? Zhao Bo, Liu Wan, you hold him real good for me!

"He's only in year two, five years younger than you! You should pick on someone your own size! You think you're a tough guy, yeah? Alright, let's see what you can do!

"You think you can touch *my* little brother? You can't afford to get him hurt! What, you think your retard brother is better?

"Zhao Bo, get me a brick."

"Alright, Lu Jia. You beat 'im good enough. Just look at 'im."

"Good enough? He didn't think so when he was beatin' up my brother!"

"You might kill him at this rate."

"Yeah, and there's a bleeding hole in my head where he hit me with that stick."

"Just watch it, okay…."

"Better that he dies! His mom's half a retard, and his dad wasn't clean either[14]. That's why they got married, and their kid, Xu Zheng, turned out a retard, too!"

"Really?"

"My mom said so, that's what everyone at work says! Retard is in the genes! So when Xu Ping gets married, his son's gonna be just like his brother, all retards!"

"But Xu Ping looks pretty normal, though?"

"How should I know? His mom was stupid but really pretty. His dad's a good-looking man, too. And Xu Ping doesn't look like either of them."

"What if he's adopted?"

"Yeah, maybe! He knew he'd have a retard kid, so he picked up a normal brother to take care of the retard. See, Xu Ping plays at the sandbox with him every single damn day. He's better than a child bride[15]!"

"Hahaha…."

"Alright, let's go. Hurts my eyes just lookin' at these two fucking piles of shit!"

[14] There was a time when the Communist Party would evaluate people based on how "communist" you were. This meant if you or anyone related to you owned land or was wealthy, you were not clean. This was written in your records and followed you everywhere in life.

[15] Girls who married into the family to take care of their much younger husband.

Xu Ping lay on the ground in silence.

Blood dripped out from the crack in his head only to dry before reaching the ground.

The sky had completely blackened now. The stars were like streetlights of the night, faint silver bulbs in the dark blue sky.

It was late summer, early autumn. The bugs were having the last party of the year because once the first frost came to the city they would soon die and return to the earth as dirt.



Xu Ping did not bat an eyelash.

He couldn't recall the last time he had the liberty of lying on a dusty floor. Was it when he was four? Or three?

The memories of childhood had become hazy, and even the face of his dead mom was blurry beyond recognition.

Dad, Xu Zheng, and himself were the only ones left.

The older he got, the more invisible restrictions were put on him. It was as though he was growing inside a box, year after year. Soon, his body had become square as well.

He could not roll around on the floor. He could not use his hands to eat. He could not whine, be cheeky or be scared of pain.

Dad was good to him but that "good" was different from the "good" that Xu Zheng got.

Even Xu Ping was shocked and envious of the unconditional affection that showed through his dad's eyes.

No matter how hard he tried – he got full marks on the exam, he got praise for his essay or he was the flag raiser on Monday – his dad would reply with a nod and maybe sometimes "keep it up." However, when Xu Zheng accomplished any tiny, insignificant thing, for instance, tying his shoes, his dad would shower him with hugs and kisses and rejoice as though he wanted to open the door and shout to the world: "My son knows how to tie his laces!"

Feeling that it was unfair, Xu Ping intentionally left his examination blank to get his dad's attention, but all he got was: "You've grown up, Xu Ping."

The moment his dad turned away, Xu Ping held the blank test paper with a bright red circle on it and broke out in silent sobs from the overwhelming shame, grievance and anger.

Not offering a word of comfort, his dad barked at him with his back turned, "Watch your behaviour! Don't forget, you're the older brother!"



Xu Ping wiggled his arms and legs.

Pain shot through his body. His limbs felt detached like a broken chair, creaking and moaning with every movement.

He let out a soft hiss.

A small figure crawled out from the corner and shuffled over to him.

"Seven o'clock. Supper time."

Xu Ping didn't speak.

Xu Zheng repeated after a pause. "*Gege*[16], seven o'clock, supper time!"

"Go eat yourself."

Xu Zheng shouted as though he had not heard. "*Gege*, supper!"

Xu Ping lay there, motionless.

Xu Zheng shouted again and reached out for him.

Xu Ping shoved him away, yelling, "I told you to go back yourself! Did you not hear me?!"

Xu Zheng fell onto his butt and sat there staring at Xu Ping.

It suddenly became really quiet. The silver moonlight poured into the abandoned building from the broken windows. The bugs were chirping from some bushes outside.

[16] Older brother.

Xu Ping bore with the pain as he propped himself up with the wall.

He mumbled to himself mockingly, “Hah, how did I forget you’re a retard? How would a retard know the way?!”

Xu Zheng stared at his brother with his big, round eyes.

The wound on his leg cracked open again, out from which trickled faint traces of blood.

He fumbled to get up and followed his brother out.



Out the green door, through the hallway painted greyish blue on either side, down the concrete stairs while holding onto the cracked wooden railing, one step, two step, three….

Xu Ping knew his brother was behind him without having to look back.

As they passed one streetlight after another, their shadows lengthened and shortened and at times crisscrossed.

He could see the lights from the residence of the Cultural Troupe.

Xu Ping stopped and said tiredly, “Okay, you know the way from here. Go home.”

“*Gege*, supper.”

“You’ll get supper when you go back.”

“*Gege*, supper.”

“How many times do I have to make myself clear?! If you’re hungry, you go back! Go back and eat your fucking supper!” Xu Ping screamed.

Xu Zheng stayed quiet for a moment before speaking again, “*Gege*, seven o’clock–”

But this time, Xu Ping interrupted him before he could finish.

“I’m not your brother!”

Xu Zheng faltered, possibly because he didn’t understand the meaning of this.

"*Gege*–"

"Don't call me that!" Xu Ping growled through clenched teeth. "I'm normal! I don't have a retard for a brother!"

Xu Zheng stood there.

"How would you even understand? All you do every day is eat, sleep and play with your sand. You're just an alien! Alien! An alien who doesn't know anything! Do you know what it means to live?! Do you know pain?!"

Xu Ping swung his arm back and slapped Xu Zheng across the face. Xu Zheng held his arm up in defense.

"Why don't you fight back when they hit you?! Fight back! Hit me back! Beat me up!"

"*Ge*–"

"Don't call me that! I hate you! I hate you!"

He punched and kicked his brother while tears streamed down his face as though he were in deep sorrow. Soon his brother's face was covered with red handprints. Together with the other half swollen from earlier, he was a terrible mess.

"Cry! Why won't you cry! Why don't you ever cry? You weren't even sad when mom died. You monster! You heartless monster!

"It's all your fault. Everything. All of it. If it weren't for you… If it weren't for you–"

He couldn't finish.

Xu Zheng was hurting so badly that he pushed Xu Ping away, causing the latter to trip over a rock and tip backwards.

The hole in his head opened wider and blood kept dribbling down his face.

Both of the boys were taken back.

Xu Zheng took a step forward and called softly, "*Gege*."

Xu Ping was very dizzy and his breathing hastened.

He pushed his brother's hand away as the blood and tears melted together on his face.

"Just go die. I don't ever want to see you again."



Six



"*Run, Forrest! Run!*

–Forrest Gump in *Forrest Gump* (1994)

The first toy that Xu Ping had was a light beige cardboard kaleidoscope.

You put the lens up to your eye and twist the other end while facing the sun, and the dark blue patterns would keep transforming.

You might like this combination or hate that one, but you will find one for you as long as you are patient.

The most important thing, though, is that your favourite pattern won't stop and wait for you. Every time you put it down, the shapes would go into hiding like a naughty child, so you can enjoy the fun of searching again.

But even this toy that seemed to be complex was nothing but a tube, mirrors and a piece of colourful paper.

The young Xu Ping had been extremely disappointed. He had thought that he would find countless pieces of patterned paper and he just had to pick out his favourite one, save it and never worry about searching again.

The mirror broke when he took the kaleidoscope apart. He could no longer see those beautiful shapes no matter how hard he tried to put it back together.

Xu Ping moped for a bit before tossing the kaleidoscope to the back of his mind.

A lot happened afterwards. His brother was born. His mother died. He entered elementary school. His brother also entered elementary school. His brother got kicked out. His dad almost got married with a woman named Li but the matter wasn't heard of ever again….



Xu Ping had thought he would never think of the kaleidoscope again. As he was carried into the hospital by Mr. Zhang late at night, he saw the blue mosaic floor tiles rotate under the white light in his feverish state.

"Ka…Kaleidoscope…"

"What?!" Mr. Zhang was breaking out in cold sweat. "It'll be over soon, Xu Ping. You're a brave boy. Just hold on and the doctors and nurses will treat your wound. Just hang in there. Just a little longer."

He mumbled as he hugged the man's neck, "I want the kaleidoscope…."

"Okay, okay, okay, I'll buy you a kaleidoscope when you get better!" Mr. Zhang was looking for the emergency room with Xu Ping in his arms. "You're a good boy, Xu Ping, you're a brave warrior. We're at the hospital now so just hang in there."

Xu Ping was very happy. Really, really happy.

It had been so long since someone granted his wishes unconditionally.

It had been so long since someone told him that he was a brave warrior, that he was a good kid.

He held onto this man's neck tightly. The strong, warm embrace gave him relief. He didn't have to be afraid anymore. No one could hurt him anymore.

He rested his head on the man's shoulder. The patterns on the floor kept morphing like a thousand blue blooming flowers.

He couldn't remember anything. It was as though he had turned into a baby again. Dad was listening to the radio in the living room. Mom was steaming white fluffy buns in the kitchen. He was lying on the chair by the balcony, twisting his favourite toy with it pointed at the sun. Xu Ping closed his eyes and mewled, "Dad…."

His reply was the gentle pat of a large hand on his back.

Xu Ping got seven stitches for his head injury. Half of his head was shaved clean for the CT scan, and results came back saying his skull was fine. He still got a shot for tetanus just in case.

Xu Ping had long fallen asleep when he was being bandaged up.

He had many strange dreams. All he saw were bits and pieces that he forgot by the time his eyes blinked open.

The first thing he saw when he woke up was Mr. Zhang nodding off in a chair by the cot. His glasses were hanging on the tip of his nose. His white shirt was all wrinkled.

The sky was hazy with the morning glow and there was still some bluish fog hanging in the air.

Xu Ping lay on the bed for long minutes.

Pain seemed to tug at his head and his brain refused to function like a machine missing its gears.

He sat up carefully and shook Mr. Zhang's arm.

"Why am I here?"

Zhang Jinmin woke up too and answered while rubbing his sore neck. "Do you remember, I took you here last night to get stitches?"

Xu Ping had already gone back into his protective shell; he was no longer that child who screamed for his toys.

“Thank you, Mr. Zhang,” he said very politely.

Zhang Jinmin faltered before patting the side of Xu Ping’s head that still had hair. “Child, don’t act like such an adult!”

It took Xu Ping five seconds to react.

Was he talking about me? He thought, but I’m not a child anymore.

“Where’s my brother?”

Zhang Jinmin replied honestly after stiffening. “I didn’t see him but I asked Mrs. Zhang to go look for him before I left. He’s just a kid, he couldn’t have gotten far. He’s probably home sleeping now.”

Xu Ping had always respected Mr. Zhang because he was first of all a good man. If not, Xu Ping’s dad wouldn’t have left him and Xu Zheng in his hands. Second of all, he was an honest man. Many good people were also good liars, but not Mr. Zhang. Every word he said to the elementary school student before him was truth. He spoke to Xu Ping as an equal and Xu Ping appreciated this greatly.

Eventually, Xu Ping grew easy.

He knew Xu Zheng, an idiot who didn’t like to wander around. No need to worry.

He pulled the sheets back and hopped off the bed.

A new day had begun.

With his head wrapped in white bandages like a casualty coming back from the battlefield, Xu Ping followed Mr. Zhang back to his home.

The half-bald look was just too silly. He was considering to shave it all off and wear a hat.

He didn’t even write a word for the assignment yesterday, and he didn’t know where his backpack was, either.

The worst thing, though, with going to school was that he would have to see Lu Jia every day.

All these worries and frustrations made his head hurt.

However, these were further down the road. There was a more urgent question at hand.

Xu Zheng.

Xu Ping had disappeared for the entire night after beating him up and telling him to go die. Now that he was calm, he deeply regretted saying such reckless things.

But a bit of wishful thinking was mixed in with the regret. That retard probably didn't even know what his words meant.

As he contemplated, he braced himself before walking into Mr. Zhang's home.



There was a round table in the living room. Mr. Zhang's spouse was setting the table for breakfast for their first grader daughter, Zhang Xiaojuan.

Zhang Jinmin scanned the room before asking his wife, He Mei, "Hey, where's Xu Zheng?"

He Mei placed a bowl of rice congee on the table without replying.

When Zhang Jinmin asked again, she slapped the chopsticks onto the table. "I don't know!"

Zhang Jinmin asked after her answer sunk in. "You don't know if the boy's here or not?"

"You're asking me? Where did you go all night?!"

"I thought I told you when I left. Xu Ping hurt his head and needed to go to the emergency–"

"And taking him to the emergency took the whole night?!"

Zhang Jinmin was fired up too. "The kid needed stitches and scans. *Lao*[17]-Xu left him in my hands, how could I just leave him and come home?!"

He Mei began to shriek. "Oh, you *do* know he's *Lao*-Xu's kid! What about your own kid?! Juanjuan had diarrhea all night and all

[17] This prefix is for someone relatively old and usually male.

she wanted was her dad. I didn't have anyone to help me get her to the hospital. Where were you then?!"

Zhang Jinmin glanced at the spooked girl eating her congee. "Don't yell in front of the kids. Come into the room with me!"

The two closed the bedroom door behind them.

The man's voice wasn't distinguishable, but the woman's was sharp and pierced through the door.

"Alright?! Does she look alright to you?! She had diarrhea all night, her face is paler than a ghost!"

"*Lao*-Xu this, *Lao*-Xu that! You don't owe him shit to be raising his sons for him!"

"Yeah, you're the good guy! And I'm the evil villain! You're such a good guy you forget about your own family and go raise someone else's kids! Do you care about Juanjuan? Do you care about me? Do you even care about this family?"

"Oh, *Lao*-Xu has it hard? Yes! But who doesn't have it hard?! I can cook a meal for him, but I can't cook for him every day! I can't father his children for him!"

"Xu Zheng ran away."

"How should I know where that idiot went? Juanjuan had diarrhea. Was I supposed to leave my own daughter and go looking for his son?! I went out looking once and he should be grateful!"

"What do I have to explain to *Lao*-Xu?! He's the one who's always running off to some place instead of taking care of his kids. I'm here worrying he's gonna leave for good and leave those boys to me!"

"What did you just say, Zhang Jinmin?! You say that again! Don't think I don't know about your dirty little secrets! I know what you're hiding in that book of yours! Take it out, I dare you! You disgusting–"

The woman's voice was stopped by a blunt sound.

After seconds of silence, the room turned into a popcorn pot as screams and sounds of things falling and shattering bounced off the walls.

“Go tell the Party you want a divorce! Go! I dare you!”

Xu Ping managed to get up on his shaky legs.

He said in a bare whisper to Zhang Xiaojuan sitting to his side, “Tell your dad I’m going to look for my brother.”

The frightened little girl nodded with wide-eyes.



Seven



"*What is important is always invisible.*

–Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

Xu Ping didn't go to school.

He first went home. He stood at the entrance after he opened the door. For some reason, he was scared and his knees were weak.

Only after encouraging himself silently did he step inside.

The red bucket wasn't under the table. Xu Zheng had always put his favourite toy there, but today it wasn't anywhere in the room.

Xu Ping was standing in the smack middle of the living room. Every door in the house was wide open. The window in the boys' room was opened and the light beige curtains were flapping loudly from the wind rushing in through the crack.

It was obvious that his brother wasn't home but he still called, "*Xiao*-Zheng!"

No one answered.

He stayed in the spot for a moment and then went to the kitchen. He took a glass out from the cabinet, poured himself a full glass and gulped it all down.

He was really thirsty.

He poured another glass. Halfway through, he felt sick and started dry barfing in the sink, but nothing came out.

He dumped the rest of the water and placed the glass back after washing it.

It was really quiet.

Xu Zheng never liked to talk but would make all sorts of noises. He was clumsy and would often bump into the table, making thumps and clunks, but never had Xu Ping heard him say ouch.

Xu Ping had to check on him every now and then as he did homework in the bedroom. At first, he would put down his pencil and go looking. Later, he simply called his brother's name from his seat and Xu Zheng would pop into the room quietly. Regardless if Xu Zheng was in the middle of something or how many times he had been called already, he would show up obediently as soon as his brother called his name, like a dog responding to its owner's command.



Sometimes when Xu Ping was bullied at school, he would keep calling Xu Zheng's name to feel better. As soon as Xu Zheng showed up, he would get him to go away again. Even after Xu Zheng ran back and forth dozens of time between the living room and the bedroom and his forehead was glistening with sweat, he would still behave well, without complaint, like a dumb, loyal dog.

And it was also this dumb doggy who threw a temper tantrum at Xu Ping for being late.

Xu Ping had to admit that he had no idea what was going on inside Xu Zheng's head.

He always thought his brother was a retard who was slow to react and lacked emotions. Therefore, he never considered his own words and actions before doing them. He had not only beaten him up but also told him to go die.

Perhaps in reality, he was the asshole who had been bullying Xu Zheng this whole time.

Eyes red on the verge of tears, Xu Ping slapped himself across the face.

He was going to go out looking. He was going to find Xu Zheng and bring him home. He was going to apologize to him properly.

Even though Xu Zheng was a retard, he was his dear brother, his only one.

He grabbed his keys and locked the door on his way out.

The sun is white.



This thought popped into Xu Ping's mind for some reason.

During his short elementary career, Xu Zheng had drawn one picture. The art teacher had assigned a theme like "Under the sky" or "A beautiful day" or something. Almost every other kid in the class drew a bright red sun in the top right corner, and under it were trees and flowers and a house and a road. A stickman family stood on the lawn holding hands.

Xu Zheng's drawing only consisted of a blank circle that took up two-thirds of the page while the rest of the paper was coloured blue. It looked like the Kuomintang flag.

Xu Ping was delivering homework to the staff room when the art teacher was yelling at Xu Zheng, slapping the drawing onto the table.

"What the hell is this?!"

Xu Zheng answered, "The sun. It is white."

Xu Zheng got zero on the art assignment, and the teacher demanded a redo. Xu Zheng, being the retard he was, refused to redraw it. In the end, his big brother had to do it for him.

As Xu Ping worked, he scolded Zu Zheng. "Why are you so stupid?! What's so hard about drawing a tree or a mountain? Why did I have to end up with a retard like you?!"

Xu Zheng contemplated for a while before replying, "No mountain. The sun is enough."

Xu Ping took this as evidence for his brother's retardation and remembered it very well.

On the way to the courtyard, the sun burned the skin on his arms.

The science teacher warned them not to be fooled by the colour of flames – the hotter the flame, the lighter the colour. When you turned on the gas stove, the tip of the flame was red and the lower parts slowly turned to a cool blue. There was also a kind of flame that was invisible – its light so strong that humans cannot look at it with the naked eye. White flame was the hottest of flames.



What colour is the sun?

The entire courtyard was empty. The red bucket lay forgotten by the sandbox.

The buildings in the complex were quiet too. Everyone had gone to work or school.

Xu Ping cupped his hands together in front of his mouth and shouted his brother's name through it over and over again.

His voice echoed back after hitting the buildings, sounding like a million Xu Pings all calling out to *Xiao*-Zheng.

Who of course did not answer.

Sweat soaked through Xu Ping's bandages and dripped down his face.

Have you ever lost something important?

Xu Ping meticulously searched through the courtyard three times but found no brother.

He even went to the school for the special and the teacher asked him first, "Why didn't Xu Zheng come today?"

Xu Ping wanted to say his brother was missing but couldn't get the words out of his mouth. He ended up lying, saying that Xu Zheng was sick.

The teacher was a kind person and told Xu Ping, “Make sure he gets good rest.” Then, she expressed concern for Xu Ping, too. “What happened to your head? It’s all wrapped up.”

“I tripped and fell,” Xu Ping said before running off in a hurry.

He kept searching until the afternoon until he was exhausted and starving. The wound on his head seemed to have opened again and it hurt as if someone was hammering a nail into his head.

He thought he would go home for some water and food before going back to searching again. Maybe Xu Zheng would already be home when he went back?

He dragged his legs up the stairs and when he pushed on the door, it swung open.

Xu Ping shouted with delight, “*Xiao*-Zheng!”

The air in the living room was filled with smoke. Mr. Zhang was sitting in a chair, smoking with his head down and cigarette butts piled around him.

“How did you get in?!” Xu Ping exclaimed.

Xu Ping’s appearance made Zhang Jinmin falter before he quickly squished the cigarette out. “Xu Zheng left his keys at our house so I used it. Where did you go?”

Xu Ping didn’t speak.

Zhang Jinmin followed the boy’s gaze to the cigarette butts on the ground and said embarrassingly, “Sorry, I didn’t even realize I’d made a mess.” He opened the windows to let in the fresh air and then went looking for the broom and dustpan.

Even after the ashes and cigarettes had been dealt with, Xu Ping was still standing there, not having said a word.

Even Zhang Jinmin felt awkward, but he was an adult nonetheless.

“You just had stitches, don’t go running around.”

The stubborn Xu Ping lowered his head.

“I’m sorry I lost your brother.”

Xu Ping's head was racing with thoughts. He had always respected Mr. Zhang and thought he was a good man, but even good men had their problems.

He finally spoke, "It's fine, sir. You can go back home."

For the first time in his life, Zhang Jinmin began to feel bad in front of a child.

This morning, he had a fight with his wife and was feeling frustrated beyond description. He left He Mei sobbing in the bedroom, and when he came out to the living room, Xu Ping had already left.

His wife said a bunch of hurtful things in her mad state, and even he, an adult, couldn't take it. He wondered how much Xu Ping had heard.

"Um…. Was it something you heard, Xu Ping? You know Mrs. Zhang is tough on the outside but she means well…."

"I understand." Xu Ping interrupted. "My mom died, Xu Zheng is an idiot and my dad's always away for work. We've always depended on you all these years and I feel very grateful. I'm young now, but when I get older, I will repay you."

These words made Zhang Jinmin shake with fury. He slapped the table out of anger. "When did I ask for you to repay me?!" he barked, "Who do you think I am? How dare you, Xu Ping?!"

Xu Ping was confused and wondered what he did wrong.

He was only twelve and didn't understand the secrets of adults.

Mrs. Zhang's insults were aimed for Mr. Zhang but every word of it struck him in the heart.

He had also wanted to cry and scream and throw a tantrum, but when he took a look around, he realized it wasn't his home.

No matter how good Mr. Zhang was, he was not his dad.

Xu Ping reached an answer.

Xu Chuan could beat him, scold him, raise him and feed him. Whatever he did, Xu Ping had to take it. Xu Chuan was his real

father and was responsible for him. The other people were all outsiders. Their occasional kindness was extra and undeserved, and was a debt he would have to return for the rest of his life.

Xu Ping was speaking his true feelings when he had said he would repay Mr. Zhang.

He didn't understand why the man was so angry so he just tucked his head in and refused to make another sound.

The frustrated Mr. Zhang reached into his pocket for another smoke only to find a flat box.

He scoffed at himself for acting up. No matter how mature Xu Ping seemed, he was only twelve years old and didn't know anything yet.

He treated the Xu brothers so well partly because of that unspeakable secret and partly because he was a kind man. No matter which one, he couldn't let Xu Ping treat his affection like a deal.

He did his best to suppress his rage. "Did you find your brother?"

Xu Ping shook his head. His eyes immediately turned red, but he held it in, his facial muscle taut like a string about to snap.

Seeing the boy like this, Zhang Jinmin couldn't find it in himself to stay mad. He stood up and said to the boy, "You haven't eaten, have you? I'll make some noodles for you and we'll go looking for Xu Zheng after."

Xu Zheng still had not come back by the end of that long day.

Xu Ping had always thought that his brother was an idiot, but it was this idiot who had done something incredible.

He searched everywhere Xu Zheng might have hid – the garbage dump, the boiler room, the bushes out back, inside the cement cylinders – while calling his brother's name, but Xu Zheng was nowhere to be found.

The last place he went to was the abandoned Informatics Centre.

It was sunset again and the *ding-a-ling* of bicycles rang through streets and alleys.

The sky was still light and the part right above the horizon was dyed bloody.

The past twenty-four hours had seemed to last a century. When Xu Ping stood once again before the dead China roses and shattered glass, he had the ridiculous feeling that everything had changed.

He had thought he was bearing the most pain a person could take, but after all this, he discovered that his life had only just started.



He went around the courtyard twice before climbing the stairs up. Every door that he opened only brought him disappointment.

The last room was in a corner by the stairwell on the fifth floor. The narrow white door fell in the shadows and was so dusty the white appeared grey.

It was Xu Ping's last hope.

He stood outside the door, holding the doorknob in prayer – if Xu Zheng was inside, and if he would forgive him, he would gladly do whatever in exchange even if it meant getting beat up by Lu Jia every day.

After making this wish, Xu Ping took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

The room was very dark. There was only one window the size of a workbook that was completely clouded by dust.

All sorts of things lay on the floor. Broken chairs and desks, old newspaper and used cardboard boxes piled together to form a mess.

A poster[18] hung crooked on one wall.

ABOLISH ??? (torn off), ALL HAIL THE PROLETARIAT CULTURAL REVOLUTION!

Xu Zheng was not there.

[18] This type of poster is now called "propaganda poster" in English, but because this nuance isn't in the original word, I chose to leave out propaganda.

Xu Ping closed the door while the tiny voice inside repeated: he's gone, your brother's gone….

Behind the stairwell was a metal ladder that led straight to the rooftop. Xu Ping climbed up and pushed open the metal door.

The evening breeze brushed his face. The city was bathed in the vermillion sunset. He could see into the distance, past his home. There were the long railroad tracks, the factory chimneys pumping out white smoke, the old traditional building made of grey bricks and the countless power lines and poles connecting the city in a huge spider web.



In this place, so many lived like ants, being born, growing up, attending school, finding a job, going to work, getting married, having kids, growing old….

Their sadness, their joy, their encounters and their farewells were here; their love, their hate, their insanity and their rage were here. Their lives were here, and so were their deaths.

His brother was probably somewhere down below. Xu Ping just couldn't find him.

He shouted towards the city and the setting sun, "Xu Zheng, you bastard! Come out right now!"

Only the wind replied as it blew over the railing.

Xu Ping had never been so afraid and desperate.

He had lost his brother.

At last, he hid his head between his arms and began to bawl.

Eight



"*All the stars will be wells with a rusty pulley. All the stars will pour out fresh water for me to drink…*

–Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

Have you ever lost something important?

You know it still exists somewhere in this world, but you will never find it again, for your two paths are not meant to cross. You weep and you lament and you rage, but what has been lost will never come back.

Grownups always think children are silly. They think children have fits for nothing. They think it is bad behaviour.

For they have forgotten the love of their childhood and the heartbreak they had experienced as the price for growing up.

Xu Chuan stood outside the classroom of year six division three at Railroads No.1 Elementary. His hair was messy from the wind and his eyes bloodshot from the lack of sleep due to riding the hard sleeper.

It was recess and many children wearing their red scarves were running around and chatting in the hallway.

He watched as Xu Ping came out of the noisy classroom wearing a knit hat and carrying his army green canvas bag.

"Xu Ping," Mrs. Li said, "Your dad's here to pick you up. You can go home now."

Xu Ping kept his head down.

Xu Chuan took the spotlight, "Thank you, Mrs. Li." Then, he added, "How is Xu Ping doing lately?"

"He's doing well in his coursework," she replied, "It's just that he hasn't been getting along with another student in the class. They even got in a fight."

Xu Chuan put an arm around the boy's shoulders. "He's a kid, after all. I will talk to him."

Mrs. Li smiled. Xu Chuan nodded and left.

He led Xu Ping home in a hurry and the two did not share a single word.

Three days ago, he received a telegram saying that Xu Zheng was missing and that he was to return as soon as possible. He asked for leave from work and rushed back from the wilderness in Qinghai. Even so, it was two days later by the time he arrived home.

He had barely gotten a wink of sleep these nights. The train rumbled through one tunnel after another, and the light and shadows whizzed over his face. Meanwhile, the other men in the carriage snored like the thunder. Xu Chuan could not sleep for his life. His eyes stayed wide open and watched the brown lamps flit past in the windows like shooting stars.

Sometimes it hit him that he led an exhausting life, working to the limit almost every day. He would wonder in the dark of night why his life ended up like this.

His father was sent to the Pigsty[19] and their home was raided by the Red Guards[20]. He was about to marry his girlfriend, but she

[19] The term for the place that the intellectuals were sent to as punishment for being anti-state. The term "intellectuals" was also negative in that they were seen as rebels who challenged the government and harmful

quickly abandoned him. He married Liu Yu, who was not right in the head. His first son was born. His second son was a retard….

He had long been beaten down by reality. The dreams he used to have in his early days were nothing but mere scraps now.

All these years, he had his hopes for his elder son, Xu Ping. The boy was smart and responsible. His grades were good and even Xu Zheng, who was never close to him, would listen to the boy.

He was very strict on this son. He saw Xu Ping's pains, but he never offered a word of comfort.

He was a selfish father. He loved his son, but he had no choice.

Yet, under this pressure, Xu Ping had taken care of his brother day in and day out without any mishaps. Even Xu Chuan felt grateful for this.



However, Xu Zheng had gone missing. The telegram couldn't include the details, so he rushed back to ask Xu Ping in person how this happened.

Xu Chuan sat down in the living room chair and said to Xu Ping standing in front of him, "Alright, talk."

Xu Ping didn't know where to begin. The matter was so messy and complicated. Which one was the reason behind it all?

Two dark green rings hung under his eyes. He hadn't been able to sleep ever since his brother went missing.

He had feared that this moment would come. All the effort he had put in to care for his brother was for show. If there was any meaning to his short, twelve-year life, it would have to be making this man, the most important person to him in this entire world, proud of him. But now he had to destroy this himself. He had to strip away his beautiful shell and expose the ugliness inside. He had to

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to the building of a harmonious society. The original term in Chinese is literally the place where cows are kept.

[20] The communist army of Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution in 1966 and 1967.

tell his dad that the vicious, venomous demon inside was his true self.

Xu Ping took a deep breath. “Six days ago, I came home late ‘cause the class meeting ended late….”

He told the story slowly and in detail, not missing a single thing. Like a flaying, the words sliced him open and blood oozed out from within. He described watching Lu Jia beating up his brother and taking pictures. He described being ridiculed and beaten with a brick. He described the argument he had with Xu Zheng, the slaps and the kicks and the scolding. He described being pushed by Xu Zheng and his wounds ripping open. He even repeated the words he never should have said.



“Just go die. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

It was as though his soul was hacked into two halves by an invisible axe. One half was chained inside him. The hurt, the disappointment, the fury and the guilt burned him like fire. He couldn’t budge at all; teeth clenched and muscle taut, he could barely feel half of his body. The other half was flying in the air like a kite. He had pretended to be a good brother for too long, and he should have known that this day would come, for the fake can never become real. He had finally let his dad down, finally exposed his ugly self to the most important person in his life. He would never shed any more tears for he had nothing else to cause him pain or fear.

He stood in silence before his dad, head bowed low, after he finished telling his tale.

He was wearing khaki pants and a blue top. His mom had made the knit hat on his head which was so worn that the threads were frayed.

“Take off your hat,” Xu Chuan ordered.

Xu Ping took it off and held on to it, revealing his pale scalp and white bandages.

Xu Chuan ordered again, “Come closer.”

Xu Ping took a step forward.

Xu Chuan brought his right hand back and slapped the boy across the face hard.

Xu Ping tumbled back from the impact and stayed standing only by holding onto the table. His ears began to ring.

His dad said something else, but all he could hear were trains chugging and chooing inside his skull.

He shook his head a few times.

He could make out a few words. “You…I…beat you….”

He didn’t even process the thought before he blurted out, “A father has every right to beat his son.”

Xu Chuan slapped him again.

This time he couldn’t hear anything.

He watched his dad’s wrath like watching a silent film. He felt no pain as his dad barked at him so fervently that spit was flying out. As he held the hat in hand, he wondered why he had ever been so afraid of upsetting and disappointing him.

He couldn’t think of a reason at all.

His mind began to wander. He recalled his mom when she was knitting this hat for him. So quiet and pretty, no one would have said she was a retard.

Dad must really love Mom, Xu Ping thought, he wouldn’t hit me until I took the hat off. He didn’t want Mom to know and weep from up above.

Xu Ping was really glad. He became certain that Lu Jia’s mom was lying. She was the mother of that son of a bitch, after all. His dad didn’t marry his mom because he was dirty or whatever, and he wasn’t some kid they’d picked up….

How nice would it be if the class meeting hadn’t gone overtime? Then Xu Zheng wouldn’t have gotten mad at him, and he wouldn’t have gone to the bookstand. He would have taken Xu Zheng home

before Lu Jia got to him first. They would have avoided this episode and grown up without a pain.

He looked at his father. The man was in middle age but still very handsome. His perfectly chiselled face, tall build and solid shoulders would have gotten him a second marriage if not for his retard son.

If and when that happened, his dad would have another child – a healthy, active and clever child.

But they would not be Xu Zheng.

Mom had died. He would never have another brother.

With that in mind, Xu Zheng seemed awfully pitiful.

Xu Ping interrupted, “Don’t remarry, Dad.”

Xu Chuan stopped, angry and confused.

Xu Ping said, “Xu Zheng will come back and if he doesn’t, I’ll go look for him. If he dies, then I will repay him with my life.”

Xu Chuan had been through so much in his lifetime and built a full suit of armour for himself that he thought nothing could ever bring him down, but his son’s words easily punched through to his heart, leaving it shrivelled in a ball.

He glared at his elder son with a wild look of a madman. He wanted to scream at the boy: “You’re a disappointment. You’re a bad brother!” But he couldn’t find it in himself to say so anymore.

He clawed at his own chest. He needed to be alone for now.

Xu Chuan waved his hand, telling Xu Ping to get his sorry self back into his room.

Nine



"I do not ask to walk smooth paths
Nor bear an easy load.
I pray for strength and fortitude
To climb the rock-strewn road.

–Gail Brook Burket

Xu Ping sprawled on his bed and fell asleep.

There were two single beds side by side in the room. Every winter, their dad would push the two together and the brothers would huddle together for warmth on the cold nights.

Xu Ping had bad circulation and his hands and feet were always icy to the touch in winter; Xu Zheng was smaller in size but radiated heat like a fire.

Snowy nights up north meant that the coal furnace couldn't make the room more than a few degrees warmer. The moment you go under the freezing covers, you must have a tremendous amount of willpower not to jump out shivering like a fish in broiling oil.

On these nights, Xu Ping would pretend to have a lot of homework and delay going to bed. Only when Xu Zheng had warmed the bed would he quickly strip off his winter coat, jump under the covers and hug his brother tight.

Xu Zheng wouldn't complain even if he was woken up, and would turn around to pull his brother who was a head taller than he into his arms.

And Xu Ping would ask every time, "Are you cold?"

Xu Zheng would nod honestly but still stick his brother's cold hands under his own winter pajamas.

Warming his brother's hands and feet was one of li'l Xu Zheng's jobs.

His brother might have been impatient with him during the day but would always be very gentle on cold winter nights. His brother wouldn't tell him to go away or call him stupid. Even if he made some mistakes, he would be quickly forgiven. If the older boy was in a good mood, he might even ask the younger boy about his day at school, what he did, whom he met, what he had for lunch and such. Xu Zheng always took a long time before he came up with his answer, and by then, Xu Ping was likely nodding off. His breaths brushed Xu Zheng's neck like the itchy swipes of a dog's wagging tail, making an entire side of his body tingly.



That was a Xu Zheng that his brother never knew, one who would tuck the taller boy in snugly with clumsy hands so that he may have a toasty dream.

It was already dark by the time Xu Ping woke up. Someone had taken his shoes off and pulled the covers over him so that he managed to find some sleep after days of insomnia.

None of the lights were on in the house.

He couldn't hear anything except the ticking of the clock in the living room.

Dad was probably out.

The spot where he had been slapped was still stinging but he let out a sigh of relief.

He gulped down a glass of water from the kitchen and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He felt revived.

He glanced at the clock when he went back to the living room. Under the dim moonlight, he saw the hands point to eight-thirty.

He had slept for nearly nine hours!

Whiff. A red dot lit up in the dark only to disappear in the next moment.

Xu Ping stopped dead in his tracks.

The master bedroom door was not fully shut, and he could see the large, still figure that was his dad seated deep in the weave chair. His back was slightly hunched as though something heavy was weighing down on his spine. He had his arms rested on the knees while a lit cigarette rested between his left index and middle fingers. Its feeble red light winked in and out of existence.



Something about this picture made Xu Ping's heart ache.

Lazy smoke slithered up into the dark air like an ugly beast preparing its attack. The red light glowed at the lift of a hand, and the white paper turned into bleak ash only to fall down without a sound.

Xu Ping turned around, wanting to pretend like he had not seen anything and walk away.

"Xu Ping?" Xu Chuan asked with his back to the door.

Xu Ping could only stop and answer, "It's me."

The two fell quiet.

They were the two closest people, yet they couldn't find the words to hold a conversation.

Xu Chuan killed the smoke and, along with it, all his dark emotions.

"Hungry? I'll fix us something."

Neither of them said a word during the meal.

The tomatoes were a bit burnt and the omelette had bits of eggshell in it. Xu Ping spat out the chewed shells and continued eating his rice.

"Have more veggies." Xu Chuan put some chives into his son's bowl.

Xu Ping glanced up. "Thank you, Dad."

Clunk. The clock hand jumped to nine-thirty. Normally, Xu Zheng would be in bed at this time.

The father and son stopped eating at the same time, and a heavy silence hovered in the room.

"I'll clean up. You go to bed; you have school tomorrow." Xu Chuan pulled back his chair and stood up to tidy the dishes.



Xu Ping had just come out from the bathroom after brushing his teeth when he heard a knock at the door.

There was the splish-splash of water coming from the kitchen with the occasional clinking of dishes and chopsticks.

Xu Ping opened the door to find a plump middle-aged woman with long permed curls standing in the lightless hall. She was wearing a blue satin one-piece while carrying a plastic net bag in one hand.

Xu Ping found her familiar but couldn't put his finger on it.

"Who are you looking for, ma'am?"

The woman pulled a smile and asked, "Is *Lao*-Xu in?"

Xu Ping nodded and turned around to get his dad.

Xu Chuan dried his hands and went to see the visitor while Xu Ping dried the clean dishes and placed them back into the cupboard.

He could hear quiet voices from the doorway. His dad was probably having small talk with the visitor. Their voices were too low and he couldn't make out the words.

In less than five minutes, he heard the door close and the lock clinking into place.

Xu Ping walked out of the kitchen to see his dad placing the bag full of canned fruits on the dinner table.

"Who was that?"

Xu Chuan didn't answer.

Xu Ping rummaged through the bag; peach, pineapple, mandarin orange, and even two jars of lychee which was hard to find even if you had the money to buy it.

At that time, canned fruits were a rare delicacy.

Xu Ping instantly became curious of this generous madam. "Who was that? Why did she give us so much canned fruit?"

Xu Chuan replied, "You've seen her before. She's the commissar[21] of the Cultural Troupe, your classmate Lu Jia's mom."

"Better that he dies! His mom's half a retard, and his dad wasn't clean either. That's why they got married, and their kid, Xu Zheng, turned out a retard, too! My mom said so, that's what everyone at work says! Retard is in the genes! So when Xu Ping gets married, his son's gonna be just like his brother, all retards!"

Xu Ping stared at his dad.

Xu Chuan stayed mute.

Xu Ping asked, "And you took it, Dad?"

Xu Chuan said, "Yes, I did."

Xu Ping nodded. "Good."

He pushed open the living room windows. A round moon hung in the sky and a cool breeze blew in from afar.

He spotted Lu Jia's mom walking out from his building, her high heels knocking sharply on the concrete. The faulty streetlights were flashing on and off as clouds of moths fluttered about.

[21] Political commissar.

Xu Ping didn't know where he got the strength to hurl the dozen or so jars out the window.

BANG! CRACK! The glass shattered into a million pieces, scattering across the concrete. The sweet stench of fruits could be smelled from where he was.

The startled woman turned around.

Xu Ping shrieked out the window. "We don't want your fucking fruit! Give me back my brother! Give 'im back!"

The lights of the homes in the complex turned on and the residents were poking their heads out to see.

Xu Ping was jumping in fury as he held onto the windowsill. "So what if he's a retard?! What right do you have to bully him?! Tell Lu Jia to come! Why didn't he come to school?! He was fine beating me with a brick, wasn't he?! You stinkin' moneybags think you can do anything! He should come to finish the job, then! Get him here! Imma kill him! Imma–"

Xu Chuan grabbed his son by the waist and pulled him away from the window.

The boy's nail broke on the windowsill and began to bleed.

The neighbours were talking and even the houses on the other side had their lights on.

The woman scurried off, not even looking at where she was going, and the sound of her clattering heels faded away.

Xu Chuan closed the windows.

His son was sitting on the floor, crying with clenched teeth.

"Why did you accept her gift?!"

"She came to apologize."

"Do you know what she says about us behind our backs?! She said you married Mom because of your status. She said retard is in the genes. She said Xu Zheng's a retard because Mom was a retard!"

"What they choose to say is up to them."

Xu Ping questioned with eyes red with fury. “Are we your sons or not?!”

Xu Chuan really wanted to slap the boy, but he stopped himself.

He pulled his son off from the floor, barking, “What do you want me to do?! Beat them up to exact revenge?! You want me to go beat up Lu Jia and his mom?!”

Xu Ping was dumbfounded. He knew that it was not the right thing to do, but he was in so much pain. It felt like he was walking barefoot on the scorching road to hell, and he just wanted to drag everyone who had hurt him along with him.

After a long pause, Xu Chuan finished, “Sorry, but I can’t do that.”

Xu Ping cried, “I hate you, Dad!”

Xu Chuan grabbed his son’s shoulders. It took all his will to stop the rage from taking over.

He had always thought that being a father was one of the most difficult things in life, but never had he ever wanted to explode with anger.

“You look down on Xu Zheng. You think he’s stupid and clingy. You think he’s always holding you back and making the classmates bully you and laugh at you, don’t you?! And when I don’t exact revenge like the way you want, you think I don’t care about you, don’t love you, so you hate me. Is that right?!”

Xu Ping just kept sobbing.

Xu Chuan thought he must have been a failure of a father. How did he raise a son like this? The boy understood nothing. This was nothing compared to the hardships that life had in plan.

He said to Xu Ping, “Your brother can see no one else. He’s slow to feel pain. He can’t feel anything when people bully him or ridicule him. There’s only one person in this world who can hurt him. Now tell me who that is!”

Xu Ping was crying so hard he could not breathe.

He knew. He had always known. His brother had gone missing because he told him to go die. It was his sin and it trapped him in like a tar pit, suffocating him.

Xu Chuan let go of his son.

“I am a failure of a father, and you are a failure of a brother! I’ll say this once. Never hold someone else responsible for your own responsibilities! You think life is unfair. Life is unfair to each and every person. What you must do is to shoulder the responsibility that belongs to you. You must not fear and run away, and do not blame someone else!”



Xu Ping was gasping for air while he said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry….”

He had been waiting, waiting for the chance to apologize to his brother and to beg for his forgiveness.

All his hate and anger was not aimed at others but rather a reflection of himself.

He hated himself more than anyone else.

Xu Chuan pulled his son close. “You’re a man! And men don’t cry!” He wiped the boy’s face clumsily. “Just remember to say sorry to your brother when he comes back.”

Xu Ping nodded as he choked on his tears.

“Don’t use the word ‘hate’ so easily again. You’ll find out when you grow up that there is so much hate in this world that two strangers could murder each other in cold blood over disputes about money or differences in values. If you hate your family, then you have no reason to keep living. Don’t talk about dying so easily, either. Dying is nothing; everyone dies. But living is much harder. Remember, Xu Ping, you will only have one brother, Xu Zheng, and Xu Zheng will only have you as his one brother. I will die too one day, so if you really feel sorry, you must live on for his sake!”

Xu Ping nodded as tears trickled down his face.

Xu Chuan didn’t know how much of this the young boy understood. No one knew better than him how heavy a burden it was.

But Xu Ping was still young and Xu Chuan could still support them for now.

He really wanted Xu Ping to promise him that he would never abandon his brother after their dad died, but in the end, he couldn’t say it.

Xu Chuan sighed and brought his son in for a hug.



Ten



You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.

Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house.

–Matthew 5:13-15

Brrrring!

The cranky, bald math teacher, Mr. Ma, was still screaming from his spot behind the podium when the bell rang.

"I only made the test harder by a tiny, weeny bit, and everyone fails! The lowest mark was nine! NINE! Is this even possible for a student your level?! Huh?! Even a blindfolded pig would score higher than this! You think you're still in kindergarten? You'll be taking the junior high entrance exam this year! You won't get into a good senior high if you don't get into a good junior high, and if you don't get into a good senior high, you won't get into a good university! And if you don't get into a good university? Hah! I'll be frank with you, your life will be O-V-E-R, over!"

Xu Ping raised his right hand.

"WHAT?!" Mr. Ma yelled.

"The bell rang, Mr. Ma," Xu Ping stood up[22] and said.

The classroom went silent and the entire class turned their eyes to the boy.

Ma Guozhong slapped the podium. "Are you implying I'm deaf?! So what if the bell rang? You all have to sit there in your seats until I dismiss you!"

Xu Ping replied very calmly, "But, sir, I can't sit down, my butt hurts. I have to go home and take a shit."

The class burst out in laughter.

Ma Guozhong was so angry his lips were shivering. He flipped through the papers on the desk, planning to pick on Xu Ping next. But, when he found the boy's examination, he saw that Xu Ping had scored seventy-six, a high score in the class. There were only maybe four or five kids who had higher scores than he did. Unable to express his rage, he became even more furious.

Then, someone sneered. "Take a shit? You mean go looking for that retard in the outhouse?"

The laughter soon died down as everyone sneaked nervous glances towards Xu Ping.

It was then that Ma Guozhong recalled this class's homeroom teacher telling him about a student whose brother had gone missing. The family was going through a tough time and she had asked him to look out for the student.

Xu Ping turned around and answered indifferently, "That's right, everybody knows! My brother's a retard who was kicked out of school. He can barely remember the way home. My mom died and my dad has a tough job, so I have to go looking for my brother as

[22] Students stand up when being addressed by the teacher.

soon as school ends. We don't have any other family. He might be a retard but I can't just leave him, can I?"

The classroom fell silent. Every student's face burned with a strange sense of shame that made them uncomfortable in their own seats.

Even Mr. Ma started to feel bad. He tidied the papers and his books while spitting, "Just you wait till tomorrow." Then, he left out the door.

After Xu Ping packed his own bag, he looked up to find quite a few eyes on him. He cracked a smile at them and they all whipped their faces around as though burned by his gaze. No one dared look him straight in the eyes.



Almost every single student in this class had badmouthed Xu Ping's retard brother. Now that his brother was missing, the gossip became evil curses and Xu Ping's smile became spiked with judgement.

As he was leaving, Lu Jia was coming back in from the bathroom with a bucket of water since he was on cleaning duty. The two met in a standoff at the stairwell.

Xu Ping stuck his right hand into his pant pocket where he had the folding knife that he used to sharpen his pencils.

He looked at Lu Jia from the corner of his eye with an indifferent expression as though waiting for the other boy to react first.

Lu Jia wanted to snort and call him a piece of shit like he had done before, but for some reason, his hairs stood on end. There was something different about the skinny boy, but Lu Jia couldn't put his finger on it.

A leg stuck out from nowhere and the bucket tumbled down the stairs, splashing water everywhere.

Lu Jia turned and screamed, "Who the fuck was that?!"

Beside Xu Ping was a tan, burly boy with a buzz cut who looked at him with a nasty sneer, “Me. Got a problem with that?!”

Lu Jia’s gaze bounced between He Zhi and Xu Ping before finally nodding. “I see how it is. Just you wait.” Then, he went downstairs to get his bucket.

He Zhi gave a scoff and wanted to give chase, but Xu Ping stopped him.

He Zhi spat on the ground in disgust. “Asshole.”

Xu Ping nudged him before heading downstairs himself. “Relax. I don’t need you to stick up for me, okay?”

He Zhi rushed after him. “I don’t know what I saw in that guy. I’d thought he was a good friend.”

Xu Ping didn’t respond.

Then, He Zhi kept babbling to Xu Ping all the way until the school entrance. Xu Ping asked, “What can I do for you, *Da*-Zhi?”

He Zhi scratched his head. “I thought I’d go looking for your brother with you.”

Xu Ping was touched, but he still refused. “You know what my brother looks like? Alright, just drop it. The police are on it, anyway.”

He Zhi looked at the other boy like he had something else to say, but Xu Ping interrupted him impatiently. “I’ll see you later then.”

All He Zhi could get out of his mouth in the end was “okay.”

His friend seemed to have changed into a different person in the past few weeks. Like a water bottle refilled with erguotou[23], it appeared transparent like the water that was previously present but it was bound to explode sooner or later.

As he watched the other boy shrinking into the distance, he suddenly shouted, “Ping-*zi*!”

Xu Ping didn’t look back and only waved his hand half-heartedly.

[23] A type of baijiu around 56% alcohol.

Xu Ping paid five cents for a local newspaper from a street vendor.

He shook out the pages as he stood on the street. He skipped over the headlines, the international events on page two and the economy section on page three to the local news.

"House caught fire this morning. One dead, three wounded."

"Regular bus pickpocket arrested by undercover officer while passengers cheered."

"Free admissions at Beijiao[24] Zoo in accordance with October 4th International Animal Day attracted numerous visitors."

After skimming everything, he found nothing on missing children or child trafficking. Xu Ping went through the ad section slipped in between the other sections and found the "Missing Person" ad that his dad had been posting for the last three weeks.

"Xu Zheng. M. 8yo. Last seen Tieshan Dist., City of X, Sept 8th 1983, wearing red tank top, blue shorts. Reward for persons with info. Pls contact Xu Chuan."

Below it was a black and white photo of Xu Zheng and the address and phone number of his dad's workplace.

The newspaper flapped loudly in the cool autumn breeze. Xu Ping folded the newspaper back neatly and put it in his bag.

Autumn was right around the corner.

The poplar leaves had turned gold and gently floated down to the ground along with the refreshing west wind. The apparel on the streets was no longer white tank tops but blue Mao suits that had four square pockets on the front. There was the occasional soldier wearing green army attire, too. Street vendors began to sell baked sweet potatoes and fried chestnuts, the rich, sweet scent of which could be smelled from a ways off.

[24] Literally north of the city.

Xu Ping stood on the street watching the people walking to and fro.

Reporting to the police, posting ads, putting up flyers on power poles….

They had done all that could be done, yet Xu Zheng still had not returned.

Dad asked for a month-long break and went out searching every day. Xu Ping did not want to go to school either, but he got scolded by his dad when he brought it up.



Suddenly, Xu Ping's hand darted out for a kid who walked past him. The kid jumped in fright and turned around with a startled expression, but the small eyes and thin brows were as different from Xu Zheng as could be.

Xu Ping let go of the poor child. "Sorry, wrong person."

The kid's friends pushed him along their way while grumbling under their breaths.

The old man selling newspapers asked, "Looking for someone?"

"Yes," Xu Ping replied, "I'm looking for my brother. He's missing." Meanwhile, he took out the newspaper he had just put away and pointed at Xu Zheng's photo. "Have you seen him, sir?"

The man put on his glasses and squinted before shaking his head. "No, 'fraid not."

Xu Ping thought he would be disappointed, but perhaps the disappointment so far had been too much. He just nodded as though he had expected the answer. "Thank you."

The old man pitied him. "Ya called the police yet? Times are a-changin', I tell ya. My boy was sixteen when he joined the Great Linkup[25] and went all the way to Guangzhou, and he came back safe and sound. A lotta traffickers nowadays, y'know, and when they see

[25] A movement taking place in late 1966 to early 1967 that was crucial to the Cultural Revolution. Red Guards were encouraged to travel and provided free transit and lodging to promote the Cultural Revolution. Called "dachuanglian" in Chinese and the Great Linkup in English.

a nice lookin' kid they grab 'em and sell 'em out in the boondocks. They don't care if the family's sad or not."

Xu Ping wanted to say something back but he couldn't find his voice.

He remembered that the police came knocking one night saying that they had fished the corpse of a child from the river and they wanted Xu Chuan to go into the station to check. Xu Chuan rushed off and didn't come back until late in the night. When he did, he collapsed on the weave chair and stayed there for a long time. Xu Ping clung to the door frame and his legs were weak and trembling by the time Xu Chuan spoke with a sigh.

"It wasn't your brother."

Xu Ping said goodbye to the old man and wandered around, grabbing anyone who looked like Xu Zheng from behind. Several times he saw the parents holding hands with the child, but he still rushed forward with a tiny spark of hope.

He had always hoped that he didn't have to go home after school and accompany Xu Zheng to the sandbox, but now he had lost the reason to go home. He was too scared to even look under the table whenever he walked by the living room – his brother's red bucket was under it. Seeing it made him think of Xu Zheng waiting for him every day with his legs tucked in on the chair, and this tortured Xu Ping so much he was racked with pain.

The sun was setting when he finally headed home.

It was the same Xinmin Road, the same comic book stand. Xu Ping walked past it indifferently; he did not want to read that stuff anymore.

A thousand heroes could not compare to that stupid brother of his.

He paced into the courtyard of the Cultural Troupe's complex with his head down only to bump into a familiar someone wearing black square-framed glasses and a grey jacket.

It was Zhang Jinmin running in such a rush that his glasses were slipping off his ears. He rejoiced when he saw Xu Ping.

“Where have you been?! I’ve been looking for you for ages! Hurry! Come home with me now! The police found your brother!”



Eleven



"*Give me a red rose[,] and I will sing you my sweetest song.*

–Oscar Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose*

The door to the house was half-open, and he could hear conversation coming from the living room.

Xu Ping didn't push it open.

His breathing hitched and sweat dripped down the side of his face.

He had dreamt many a times his brother sitting in the chair in the living room, telling him, "I'm back, *Gege*." He would tear up from sheer joy and wake up crying.

Was this going to be another dream? And when he pushed that door open, was he going to find himself alone in bed in the middle of the night?

"Thank you, thank you…I really don't know how to thank you enough…."

Xu Ping heard his father's incoherent speech.

"Don't mention it. The kid was actually brought in by an old fellow living at the Nanjiao[26] Dump. He'd thought the kid was mute

[26] Literally, south of the city.

since he wouldn't speak at all, and found it in his heart to look after the kid. Afterwards, he saw the missing persons ad and brought him into the station."

"That's right. I need to give him a proper thank you."

"Your kid's lucky to have met a good person. We get so many of these cases, and not even a third of them ever come back in one piece. Some of the parents have waited for so long their tears have run dry."

"Thank you, thank you officers for all your hard work. Here, have some tea, and some fruits. Don't hold back…."

The sounds died down again.

If this was a dream, he prayed to whoever was listening that he would not wake up.

He pushed on the door lightly.

There were three people sitting in the living room. One was a man in green police uniform sitting with his back to the door. Dad was sitting across from him with an overly-emotional expression, and beside him was a child covered with grime with his head hanging low.

Xu Ping stood at the doorway.

The policeman stood up, straightening his clothes. "Well, I brought your child back. I still have work back at the station, so I won't take up any more of your time."

Xu Chuan shook the man's hand, repeating his gratitude while beckoning to Xu Ping. "Come thank the officer. He brought your brother home."

Xu Ping had his eyes locked on Xu Zheng. He couldn't hear anything.

He took a step, and then another step. Every step he took, he anticipated falling into a dream state, but in the end, he stood before Xu Zheng, wide awake.

The boy's hair was long and filthy, and a disgusting stench exuded from him. He was wearing a patched-up men's undershirt that looked like it belonged in the trash. The skin on his neck and arms were black with grub, and his nails were caked with dirt.

In his dreams, his brother had always been clean and quiet like an angel. His brother would always talk to him and get him to play at the sandbox with him. His brother would smile and whine. But Xu Ping knew even as he dreamed that this was not real.

Xu Zheng had his head bowed and his shoulders were shaking. He was dirty and stinky like a beggar on the streets. He saw his older brother standing in front of him, but he didn't make a sound.

Xu Ping had thought he would rejoice like he did in the dreams, but in the end he just felt horrible.

He balled his fists tight so the tears wouldn't fall.



The trickling and splashing of water came from the bathroom, and then a squeak as the tap was twisted shut.

The door wasn't shut, and he could see from where he was in the living room his dad sitting on the small bathroom stool and holding Xu Zheng's arm.

"Come now, *Xiao*-Zheng, let's get those clothes off."

The boy wouldn't stop thrashing around.

Clutching the boy's arm, Xu Chuan tore off the undershirt that had just about turned black.

His rib bones were distinct under a thin layer of grey, grimy skin.

Xu Chuan was taken back by the sight, and he felt his nose and eyes sting.

He lowered his gaze and proceeded to the dirty pants.

"It must've been tough. Probably haven't had a proper meal all these weeks, huh? I'll make braised pork for you after we get you clean. You love braised pork, don't you?"

Xu Zheng didn't say anything. He was struggling against the hands that were trying to take off his pants.

Xu Chuan didn't expect an answer from his son either. Using brute force, he stripped Xu Zheng naked and turned him around to inspect. He let out a sigh of relief when he didn't find any injuries; the boy was just very bony.

He lifted up the pail of warm water he had prepared and poured it over the boy's head.

Xu Zheng became soaked from head to toe. The uncut hair plastered to his face, making him seem even smaller.

Xu Zheng started screaming out of shock.

The kettle in the kitchen started making bubbling sounds.

Xu Chuan shouted while he held on to his son's wrist. "Xu Ping, turn the stove off and pour the water into the thermos and bring one over here."

Xu Ping answered and got up from his seat in the living room.

The two green and red plastic thermos with grey innards were part of his mom's dowry. The couple had lived in run-down farmer housing in the nearby countryside during the toughest years of their life. There was no toilet, no kitchen, and they even had to go all the way to work if they wanted clean, boiled water.

Xu Ping filled up the thermos and plugged them with the wood corks before taking one to the bathroom.

He saw his dad attempting to rub soap on Xu Zheng while his brother was fighting back like his life depended on it.

"*Xiao*-Zheng! What are you doing, *Xiao*-Zheng! You're a good boy. Daddy's just trying to get you clean. Now behave!"

The moment the soap bar touched Xu Zheng, the boy let out a piercing shriek.

Xu Chuan grabbed his son by the shoulder. "What's wrong, *Xiao*-Zheng? You love to be clean, don't you? Who do you think I am? It's Dad. Take a good look. It's Dad!"

The man's reply was a fist to his eye.

He stayed crouching, holding his eye, unable to get up for some time.

Xu Zheng took the chance to escape, leaving a trail of wet footprints.

He passed by his brother like the wind, not even sparing the other boy a glance.

Xu Ping put down the thermos and stood outside the bathroom for a long time.



His dad still had his back turned to the door. His shoulders were trembling and his hair was sprinkled with grey.

Xu Ping gently closed the door for his dad.

He followed the footprints to the master bedroom. There was a large wood closet against one wall, of which the doors were tightly shut.

It was dark outside and the curtains were not drawn. The stars were peaking in through the glass.

The room was dim save for the light from the living room that shone a little bit past the doorway only to be swallowed by the darkness before it reached the bed.

"Anybody there?" Xu Ping knocked the closet door.

Not a sound came from the closet.

Xu Ping pulled on the handle only to find it held close by the person inside.

"Are you there, *Xiao*-Zheng?"

No one answered.

Xu Ping closed the room door and drew the curtains.

It was pitch black now except for the slit of light under the door.

The darkness was usually a source of horror, but Xu Ping somehow found himself at ease.

He had a lot to say to his brother – the things that had been weighing on his mind and the dreams that stole sleep from him – and he wanted to tell his brother that he was sorry. But when it came down to it, he was scared. He was scared of seeing his brother's indifferent face. He was scared that his courage would disappear under the cold gaze.

Xu Ping stood before the closet, not knowing how to start.

Xu Zheng was once so close to him that he had trouble keeping the younger boy away. Now his brother wouldn't even answer a call of his name.



"*Xiao*-Zheng, are you not talking to me because you don't like me?

"Where have you been all this time? Dad and I had been looking for you. Dad posted an ad on the newspaper. He was really worried about you.

"I brought your bucket and shovel back and they're under the table now. Let's go to the sandbox tomorrow, okay?

"I'm sorry I was late that day and got mad at you. You were really angry, weren't you? I'm sorry, *Xiao*-Zheng, I won't ever do that again. I'll be sure to come home on time everyday….

"Are you listening, *Xiao*-Zheng?

"How's your leg? Does it still hurt where Lu Jia hit you?

"Dad was really mad. He slapped me for the first time 'cause I lost you. He said I'm not a good brother.

"I probably am a terrible brother, aren't I?

"You know, *Xiao*-Zheng, I think you got stronger. You hit Dad on his eye just now, and it hurt so much he was crying.

"You probably don't know what pain is, do you? The human body is really fragile and it would hurt with the smallest scratches or bumps, or when you trip and fall and bleed. And sometimes even when the body is fine, your heart hurts because of things in the world you just can't overcome. And when the pain's too much, you

cry and this watery thing comes out from your eyes. So when someone's crying, he must have been through a lot of tough stuff and we should feel sorry for him.

"Dad's hurting so much he's crying, *Xiao*-Zheng. Why don't we go cheer him up later?

"Are you listening, *Xiao*-Zheng?

"Mrs. Zhang said you ran away from their house yourself. Why did you…why did you run away?

"Are you mad at me, *Xiao*-Zheng? Did my words hurt you so much that you don't want to see me again?

"Hah…. What am I saying? Of course you're mad.

"You remember Mom? Mom was pretty and quiet, and your eyes look like hers. They all say Mom was stupid but I never thought so. She never got angry for no reason, and she made yummy mantou[27] and baozi[28]. When you smiled at her, she would smile back. She was so pretty, too. She was the best mom.

"You know, *Xiao*-Zheng, Dad made me take off the hat that Mom made before he beat me. They love each other so much, Dad doesn't want her to be upset in heaven. I'm really glad, *Xiao*-Zheng.

"What does it really mean to be a smart person or a retard? Mom could make buns and knit, and she'd smile at everyone. She wouldn't hurt a soul, but because she had trouble reading and writing and interacting with people, they called her stupid. And then there's assholes like Lu Jia who doesn't know how to do anything other than bully and terrorize people weaker than them. Yet they think people like him are smart. If this is the world we live in, then I'd rather be stupid.

"Did you hear me, *Xiao*-Zheng?

"After you went missing, I kept thinking, trying to figure out how you see this world. Do you really not understand what other

[27] A type of plain steamed bun without any filling (in most of China)
[28] A type of steamed bun with filling (in most of China)

people are saying, or do you just shut your ears and not listen to what you don't want to hear? Do you really not feel pain, or are you in so much pain that you can't even begin to describe it?

"I'm sorry, *Xiao*-Zheng. I promised Mom that I'd be a good brother.

"And I didn't do that. I did a lot of horrible things and said a lot of hurtful words, and I really hurt you.

"I'm sorry, *Xiao*-Zheng, I'm sorry. I'm a terrible brother."



Twelve



"*You know, my flower… I am responsible for her. And she is so weak! She has four thorns, of no use at all, to protect herself against all the world…*

–Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

The lights in the neighbouring buildings all lit up. The entire city was probably glowing with twinkling dots of light.

The family upstairs turned on their television and someone was singing the title sequence from the film, *Red Guards on Honghu Lake*.

Waters of Honghu, wave upon wave upon wave, my home lies on Honghu shores…

Xu Ping tugged on the closet door handle lightly and the door opened a crack before the person inside quickly pulled it back shut.

"*Xiao*-Zheng."

No one replied.

Not even Xu Ping was sure how much of what he had just said made its way to his brother.

He banged on the door. "Can you come out, *Xiao*-Zheng? You're mad and I apologize. Don't hide from me."

His brother did not answer.

Xu Ping waited for a long time before trying again, this time with more power.

The door was about to come open when Xu Zheng started screaming with fear.

“No! I won’t see you! I won’t see you!”

Xu Ping froze, dumbfounded, until he began to lose hope.

There was a part of him that told him he deserved this, while another part of him became heartbroken.

He asked while fighting back his tears. “Why don’t you want to see me, *Xiao*-Zheng? Do you really hate me that much? Do you really feel that way?”



He didn’t know what to do to fix everything. He had heard the grownups say, a fault confessed is half redressed. But Xu Ping had learned long ago that not all faults could be forgiven and not everything could refresh and start again.

Flowers fell, never to return to their stems; Mom died, never to return to them.

It seemed to Xu Ping that he had accidentally broken a precious vase, and he was sad and helpless staring at the shattered pieces on the floor. Only a slight push out of anger was needed to break it, but to repair it could take months and years of careful piecing together and gluing. Even if he was lucky and could fix it, the vase would be full of cracks and never be as beautiful as it had been.

With his two hands on the closet door, Xu Ping began to weep.

He wanted to apologize but it could not get to his brother, so the apology had no use.

He had lost it all for good – the brother who only saw him; the brother who told him “The sun is enough”; the brother who would use his own tiny body to warm his older brother.

The world was big, and there was only one person, Xu Zheng, who only had eyes for him. The devotion that had no restraint suffocated him at times, but most of the time, it made him stronger.

He couldn't be weak because there was someone who needed him. He couldn't admit defeat even if his legs were going to give in because there was someone who depended on him.

He had always thought that his efforts were to win the attention of his dad, but what was it that kept him strong in the countless days when his dad was away? A tiny voice inside gave him the answer, and only Xu Ping could hear it.

He slumped onto the floor and bawled his eyes out.

He felt as though he had lost the most precious thing to him.

He had tried so hard to hide and stubbornly refused to admit that perhaps he also needed his retard brother.

All the fairytales retold the same ancient story. Those who do not appreciate what they have will lose everything they have, and it will be too late when they finally regret it.

He had been abandoned by his one and only brother.

He had been abandoned by the entire world.

Xu Chuan was making braised pork in the kitchen.

He chopped the ginger, garlic, star anise, cinnamon and chili pepper, and added oil in the wok. Then, he added sugar and after it melted, he added the pork belly and the chopped ingredients to fry. After the meat turned a dark scarlet, he moved the contents to a pot to stew for an hour. During this time, he put on the rice, made stir-fry tomato and eggs, and cooked some baby bok choy. He even made a cold cucumber dish with soy sauce, vinegar, chili peppers and sesame oil, and served it in the big blue-and-white[29] bowl.

The smoke was too much and he pushed open the window by the stove.

His left eye was still throbbing a little but he could still see. He could see all the stars in the night sky clearly. Some of them he

[29] A type of porcelain that is white with blue designs.

knew but most of them were nameless as they sparkled in the darkness.

The sky was cloudless. It was going to be a clear, sunny day tomorrow.

He hummed along with the television upstairs as he worked.

The sun's almost gone down the west; the Nansi Lake is quiet as I play my beloved willow pipa and sing that lovely tune…[30]

He had a good voice and would sometimes fill in for his colleague and sing a few songs if they could not perform.

He had been too tired recently, and only after his younger son came home did he feel a sense of relief.

This family had become whole once again and life could go on. There was nothing better than this when one was his age, an age when one had been through all the challenges that life had to throw at him.

He brought the dishes to the table and set the table. He even took out the half bottle of Hongxing erguotou from the shelf. He was going to have a good meal with his sons.

He knocked on the bedroom door. "Dinner's ready!"

The only one who came out was Xu Ping with his eyes red and puffy.

"Tell your brother to come out for dinner."

Xu Ping stayed silent for some time.

Xu Chuan tapped his chopsticks against the table lightly.

"There's no use, Dad. *Xiao*-Zheng won't see me. He's hiding in the closet 'cause he doesn't want to see me. He hates me."

Xu Chuan sighed at the sight of his son's lowered head. "He's your brother!"

Xu Ping stayed quiet yet again.

[30] A song from the movie *Railroad Guerillas*. Song found here, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0CvpwuaH2s, information on the movie here http://www.china.org.cn/video/2011-07/08/content_22949511.htm

Xu Chuan didn't want to get angry and ruin the night. He got up to fetch his other son himself.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, dinner's ready. I made braised pork." He knocked the closet door. "Your brother's gonna finish it all if you don't come out soon."

No sound came from the closet.

Xu Chuan knocked again. "*Xiao*-Zheng?"

He tried the handle to find the boy fighting to keep it closed on the other side.

When he pulled a little harder, Xu Zheng started to scream. "I'm not leaving! I won't see *Gege*!"

Xu Chuan tried again patiently, "C'mon, *Xiao*-Zheng. Your brother misses you a lot. You haven't seen each other for so long. Isn't Xu Ping your favourite?"

But Xu Zheng only repeated. "I'm not leaving! I won't see *Gege*!"

Xu Chuan persisted. "He already apologized. He knows he did the wrong thing. Why don't you forgive him, yeah?"

Xu Zheng made stomping noises inside the closet.

A little angry by now, Xu Chuan yanked on the handle only for his younger son to start shrieking again.

Xu Ping watched as his dad walked out from the bedroom and took a seat at the table.

"Let's eat," his dad said weakly.

His dad picked up his chopsticks, lined them up on the table and took some bok choy. He left it in his bowl and pushed some rice into his mouth.

Xu Ping picked up his chopsticks unenthusiastically. He wasn't hungry at all, but he had to eat.

The father and son ate in silence. No one moved towards the juicy, tender braised pork in the middle.

The rich maroon coloured meat was covered with bits of cilantro. After being stewed for so long, it would just melt on your tongue. A single whiff of the sweet sauce was enough to make anyone's mouth water. A dish like this was almost impossible to come by except for Chinese New Year's. Not only was pork belly expensive, his dad didn't have the time to spend hours on one dish.

The delicious braised pork slowly cooled. After the steam disappeared, white bits of fat began to form on top of the sauce.

"Eat the meat," Xu Chuan said to his son.

Xu Ping looked down as he stuffed rice down. "We don't get braised pork that often. Let's save it for *Xiao*-Zheng. He likes it."

After a few moments of silence, Xu Chuan threw his chopsticks down and pushed himself up from the table.

Xu Ping gasped, thinking his dad was about to beat him, and raised his arms in defence only to see his dad storm off towards the bedroom.

CLUNK! The door was kicked in. His dad roared, "You get out here, Xu Zheng!"

The closet door hit the wall. His brother screamed, "No! No!"

Xu Chuan thundered, "What do you think you're doing?! You leave home for a month without a peep. Who said you could do that?! You know how worried we were?! Then you come back and you hide in the closet. You can hide today, but can you hide forever?! You say you won't see your brother?! Then you still know he's your brother! So what if he hits you and scolds you? He's already regretted it and apologized, and even if he doesn't say a thing, he's still your brother! He's taken care of you ever since you were born, taking you to and from school, buying you things you like, taking you out to play, sticking up for you and getting into fights for you, carrying you to the hospital everyday for shots when you were sick. Are you telling you forgot all this in one month?! You won't see

him? What makes you think you can do that! What have you ever done for him?! You get out here! You get out here right now!”

Xu Ping left his meal and rushed in to calm his father. “Dad! Dad, don’t force him. He doesn’t understand….”

He saw his brother’s head buried in a heap of clothes while his small legs kicked around wildly. One hand was holding onto the frame of the closet while the other was being pulled on by his dad.

He cried, “No! I won’t see *Gege*!”

Xu Chuan was seething with rage now, his eyes bulging. “You get out here! You don’t think of him as your brother. Does that mean you don’t see me as your dad either?! What are you doing in my closet then?! Get out of here! Get out! I never had an ungrateful bastard like you for a son!”



Xu Ping heard his brother yell while fighting back. “I don’t like you! I don’t like you, Daddy!”

He wanted to leap over and cover his brother’s mouth but he was too late.

Xu Chuan froze at the young boy’s words and then his wrath took over. He let go of the boy’s arm and went looking for a stick, and when he couldn’t find one, he took the long wooden ruler on the desk and whipped it towards Xu Zheng.

Crack! The ruler broke in two.

Xu Ping was standing between his brother and dad. Blood trickled from the corner of his eye.

Time seemed to have slowed down. Xu Ping saw the ruler flying towards his brother and his body reacted before his brain. The place where he was hit felt cool at first like an ice cube rubbing against his skin. He saw an array of emotions appearing on his dad’s face: surprise, fury, heartbreak, regret and more. He had never thought that so many emotions could exist on one person’s face at one time. He kind of wanted to laugh, and then the pain hit him like a bullet.

He couldn't keep his left eye open at all. Tears kept flowing out. He probably looked so ridiculous right now he'd better not let anyone see.

He heard his dad rushing over and asking, "Did I get the eye?! Did I get the eye?!"

He shook his head. "No, but the wind is making me cry. Just get me a cold towel and I'll be fine, Dad."

He heard Xu Chuan run out, stumbling.

It stung when the tears ran over the wound.

Xu Ping covered his face, not wanting his brother to see his bloody face.

He reached behind himself trying to find his brother. "Are you okay?"

Xu Zheng did not answer.

Xu Ping didn't mind. "Dad was just angry. He didn't mean what he just said."

He paused before continuing. "Dad won't disown you. Even if the day comes that he won't take care of you, I'll be with you. Even if you don't like me or don't want to see me, I'll be with you forever as long as you still need me."

Every word that came out of his mouth tugged at his cheek muscles, making more blood flow out. Every sentence was like a flower blossoming from a bed of flesh.

"Can you tell me," he asked his brother, "Why you don't want to see me?"

"Do you really hate me?" he asked again.

It was after a really long time before he heard his brother's quiet response. "I'm sorry."

Xu Ping's heart began to fall, tumbling down to a deep, cold place.

When he was about to freeze over, he heard his brother's slow confession.

“I can’t see *Gege*. I like *Gege*, but *Gege* doesn’t want to see me. I didn’t listen to *Gege*. *Gege* told me to go die. I didn’t die. I’m sorry.”

Xu Ping stood there dumbly until he heard a sobbing sound coming from somewhere. Was that *Xiao*-Zheng crying? He touched his own face to find it wet with hot tears.

He spun around and hugged his brother.

Xu Zheng struggled against it, but Xu Ping held him tight.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry….” He started to ramble in his brother’s ear. “Don’t die, *Xiao*-Zheng. You have to live on. I want to see you every single day. We’re going to spend every day from now on together.”



This time, this time he was going to tell his brother everything properly.

Xu Zheng’s movements died down but his eyes remained shut.

“Open your eyes and look at me, *Xiao*-Zheng”

Xu Zheng shook his head furiously.

“I haven’t seen you, *Gege*. I’m dead. I really wanted to die. I kept walking and walking and….”

Xu Ping slapped his hand over his brother’s mouth.

“You’re still alive, *Xiao*-Zheng. We’re both alive. Neither of us can die.”

“I’m sorry, *Gege*,” his brother apologized.

He cried with his brother in his arms. He felt that his heart was swimming in boiling lava and his skin and bones were melting.

There would never be another Xu Zheng.

This idiot was the most precious gift that destiny bestowed upon him.

He had almost lost him, but now he had returned to him.

He swore to himself. By his blood and his tears, he swore that he would always be good to his brother. He would use his

everything to give his brother a happy life. He would do anything it took even if that meant giving up his own.



Book 2

Thirteen



"*Dear Prince, I must leave you, but I will never forget you, and next spring I will bring back two beautiful jewels in place of those you have given away. The ruby shall be redder than a red rose, and the sapphire shall be as blue as the great sea.*

–Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince*

1989

"Good evening. This is the News Simulcast[31] for Friday, May 19th 1989, the fifteenth day of the fourth lunar month. In today's programme, we look at the important speech by Premier Zhao Ziyang at Tiananmen Square in Beijing reaching out to the student protestors to stop fasting; the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Gorbachev, returns home after completing a state visit to China and has left Beijing on a private jet last night…*bzzz*…*bzzz*…We will now go into more depth on…*bzzzzzz*…."

Xu Ping hit the 19-inch colour television with his wet hands as the signal kept disconnecting. He grabbed the two antennae behind

[31] The news programme of CCTV that is broadcasted nationwide at the same time. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xinwen_Lianbo

the television and wiggled them around for a while, but the only thing on the screen was static.

"What happened to the TV?" he muttered to himself.

A series of popping sounds from the pressure cooker forced Xu Ping to stop the inspection and rush back to the kitchen.

Pork ribs and potatoes were being braised in the pressure cooker, and as the small ventilation knob spun around, a mouth-watering scent wafted out.

Xu Ping took a deep breath and removed the cooker from the gas stove.



The rice was already done. Xu Ping took out a bundle of baby bok choy from the green plastic vegetable basket and washed it a bit before stir frying it with some garlic. The drops of water still on the vegetable splashed into the boiling oil and exploded like firecrackers.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, dinner!" he shouted as he piled the baby bok choy onto a plate.

When he opened the pressure cooker, a wave of steam came rushing forth, clouding his glasses. He took a step back only to bump into a warm body. He almost tripped but the person grabbed ahold of him.

Xu Ping knew without having to look back that it was his brother who, although three years younger, had already grown taller. The boy's frame was no longer adorable as it had once been. He was like a seedling that had grown into a small tree, while still immature, the future that lay ahead was clear to see.

Xu Zheng was definitely their father's son.

Xu Ping wiped his glasses with a corner of his shirt. "Don't stand behind me like that without telling me again, okay? I could've stepped on you."

"I called you," Xu Zheng spoke slowly. "You didn't hear."

Xu Ping replaced his black glasses back on his nose and wiped away the sweat on his forehead with an arm. “Let’s eat. We’re having ribs and potatoes tonight.”

The brothers sat down at the round dinner table, and Xu Ping picked some food into his brother’s bowl.

“…you are still young, dear students! The road ahead is long and you should live on healthily to see our country reach modernization[32]. You are not like us who are old. The state and your parents put in hard work to raise you to be university students. You are now nineteen, maybe twenty years old, and to be sacrificing your life like this…I did not come for a discussion today. I came to ask that you think about this rationally….”



An old man wearing a Mao suit was speaking into a red loudspeaker in a thick Henan accent.

Xu Ping listened carefully to the leader’s entire speech with chopsticks in midair. He turned to his brother. “Did you fix the TV?”

Xu Zheng was spooning a piece of potato towards his mouth when his brother interrupted him. The potato fell back into his bowl.

Xu Ping chuckled and gently patted his clumsy brother on the head.

Brrrring!

Xu Ping put down his utensils and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, Xu Ping? It’s Dad.” A familiar, deep voice said on the line.

Xu Ping covered the receiver and told his brother to lower the television volume.

“Dad, how’s shooting going?”

[32] The Four Goals of Modernizations include industrial modernization, agricultural modernization, national defence modernization and scientific modernization.

“Good, good. We’re still taking exterior shots in Yan’an. I had nothing to shoot today so I took the day off and came to the post office[33] to give you a call. How’s everything at home?”

“We’re doing good. Just eating dinner now, actually. Braised potatoes and ribs. So when are you coming home, Dad?”

“In a few more days. The director wanted to reshoot a few more scenes after this. You know I’m old pals with Wang, and I told him my son’s taking the university entrance exam. He immediately agreed to let me shoot my parts first so I can head home right after we finish.”

“Don’t rush it, Dad,” Xu Ping replied with a smirk. “It might be a supporting role again, but this one’s our great Premier Zhou Enlai[34]. You’d better give it a hundred and ten percent and not let him down.”

“Let him down?!” Xu Chuan snorted. “I am a Golden Rooster[35] winner, thank you very much! I was just too skinny to play the great President Mao[36] back then, or else I would’ve definitely been the leading role!”

Xu Ping broke out in laughter.

The second year after his brother came back home, a director from August First[37] got in contact with his dad and offered him a role as He Long[38], the rebel who joined the revolution with two cleavers. Xu Chuan grew a moustache and learned Tujia[39] with a colleague. He carried around two Mauser C96s that he carved out of wood and practised whipping them out at home, He entertained his son by making gunshot sounds while he did so and by telling jokes

[33] The post office was in charged for telecommunications as well, formerly named Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications.
[34] Zhou Enlai, the first premier of PRC (1949-1976).
[35] A film award given in mainland China by the China Film Association, which is state-controlled.
[36] Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China and essentially the ruler of PRC from its establishment (1949) until his death in 1976.
[37] A state-run film company.
[38] A military leader who rebelled against the Kuomintang and joined forces with the Communist Party.
[39] language spoken by the Tujia people in Southwestern China

in the Hunan language. The movie received acclaim after its release, and Xu Chuan won the Golden Rooster that year for best supporting role. He finally had his big break as an actor at the age of thirty-eight and made it to the big screen.

"Do you have enough to spend?"

"Yeah. Xu Zheng and I don't need to buy anything expensive, and groceries don't cost that much."

"How's reviewing?"

"We're doing exercises every day, and mock tests every three days. Getting into university shouldn't be a problem if I perform normally."

Xu Chuan hesitated before asking tentatively, "What schools were you planning to apply to?"

Xu Ping didn't answer.

"I talked on the phone with your homeroom teacher the other day. She said that your marks on the region-wide mock tests came out, and you need to fill out your application by the end of the month. She told me your marks are really good and the school wants you to apply for a school in Beijing and they asked me to give you support as a parent." Xu Chuan paused. "Are you there, son?"

"Yeah."

Xu Chuan continued after a moment. "For all these years, with your mom gone and your brother like this, this family wouldn't have made it this far if you weren't such a good kid. You're stronger than me, you're responsible and independent. You've never made me worry whether it comes to your brother or your own schoolwork. Dad's never thanked you for all that."

"Dad!" Xu Ping interrupted. "What are you saying? We're family!"

Xu Chuan didn't stop. "Son, you're old enough for what I'm about to say. Dad's not a capable man. I only know how to act. I can't do business and become a millionaire, but I've been working

in so many projects these years and saved a few bucks. Maybe not a lot but I can spare a couple grand. I just want you to know, you're still young and you got a whole life ahead of you. I'm not that old either, and it's not time for you to shoulder everything yet. Our family might be different, but I want you to have a good life like any other parent. I want you to know that you don't have to worry when you fill out that application form 'cause Dad will support you whatever you choose. The world's a big place, and you should explore it while you're young, broaden your horizons. *Xiao*-Zheng has his own life, just as you have your own, and you both are my sons."



"Geez, Dad," Xu Ping said with red, teary eyes. "Was that the script you were reading?! I got goose bumps hearing that. The telephone's not cheap, Dad. I'd rather you buy more souvenirs to bring back."

"My god, you lil' rascal. Here I am trying to have a serious talk with you. That was no script!"

Xu Ping nodded with the receiver between his shoulder and ear. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, Mr. Premier Zhou."

Xu Chuan lost the will to continue and only replied weakly, "Oh whatever, you lil' rebel. But I do have to warn you, it hasn't been very peaceful out there lately. Even we've caught wind of it out here in the boondocks. Just a bunch of crazy children, I say. Don't you dare join whatever it is they're doing!"

"Why would I," Xu Ping retorted, "The entrance exam's next month!"

Xu Chuan felt relieved. "You youngsters haven't been through anything. You don't know the consequences of political movements."

"Dad," Xu Ping asked, "Do you want to talk to *Xiao*-Zheng?"

Xu Chuan paused before answering, "Yeah."

Xu Ping put down the receiver and beckoned his brother.

Xu Zheng was a fast eater. His bowl had long been empty, and he was watching the television while sitting upright like an elementary student with hands on his lap. His gaze had not changed and was very focused. Other than the lack of a tail, he looked just like a golden retriever.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, it's Dad."

Xu Zheng slowly strained his neck to look without moving the rest of his body.

"Come talk with Dad." Xu Ping gently rubbed his brother's head. "Ask how he's doing."

Xu Zheng stared at his brother as he walked over to the phone.

"HELLO!"

Fourteen



"*And life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl. Sweet is the scent of the hawthorn, and sweet are the bluebells that hide in the valley, and the heather that blows on the hill. Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?*

–Oscar Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose*

Xu Zheng was sitting at the dinner table, slowly turning the dial of the radio with his ear against the speakers.

Xu Chuan had bought the small black box for his younger son when he was shooting in Shanghai. Two AA batteries fit in the back and allowed the user to carry it along on their morning jog or a stroll in the park. It was the definition of modern in the eighties.

His brother listened closely to the static that sounded just like noise to Xu Ping. The younger boy looked like the underground communist agents as portrayed in movies, waiting to decode the enemy's telegram.

The red bucket lay in the back of the cupboard along with the ball and shovel, slowly gathering dust.

THE WHEELS OF TIME CANNOT BE STOPPED!
COMMUNISM IS UPON US!

Xu Ping had read a slogan on one of the walls in their neighbourhood when he was younger, and it made a deep impression on him. He had once imagined the entire world as a pot of congee that was being stirred by a ladle called time while the old rice melted at the bottom of the pot with new rice being constantly added in.

The great leaders had gone to their last resting place before the communist dream came true, first Premier Zhou, then Chairman Mao. Though he was only five years old, Xu Ping could not forget the white flowers and the mourners who gathered in the thousands to weep.



Before he knew it, his brother had grown up too. He wasn't sure when the younger boy abandoned sand and began taking a passion with complex stuff like vacuum tube radios.

Xu Ping contemplated as he sped through the politics exercise given by his teacher – explain briefly the meaning of the statement "Our country is currently in the initial stage of communism" and provide evidence.

The window before the desk was open. The cool breeze of the May evening brought in the delightful smell of some flower while small bugs kept bumping into the green mesh as they tried to race to the light indoors.

The clock in the living room went tick-tock in a steady rhythm.

"…Secretariat of the Party, Wen Jiabao, was also among those who visited the students at Tiananmen Square. Today marks the seventh day of the fast at Tiananmen Square. Many students have showed signs of failing health and numerous had been hospitalized last night. This was the Voice of America."

The voice of a female announcer from an enemy station suddenly started playing from the shortwave channel that Xu Zheng had found.

Startled, Xu Ping barked at his brother, "*Xiao*-Zheng!"

Xu Zheng slowly turned to look at his brother.

"Don't listen to this," Xu Ping explained hurriedly.

After the nine-thirty news, the station started playing Teresa Teng's *Goodbye My Love*.

Goodbye my love, my love goodbye[40]*. Goodbye my love, who knows when we'll meet again.*



It was a song so gentle and dear that even Xu Zheng became engrossed and ignored his brother.

Xu Ping got up to shut the window and draw the dark green curtains.

He switched off the desk lamp and walked towards his brother.

There was only a small, dim bedside lamp illuminating the room.

He sat down beside his brother and rested his head on a hand as they listened to this song that was once banned[41].

"I'll always miss you, miss you with a gentle love, miss you with a burning heart, miss you with a sweet, sweet kiss. O that beautiful voice, how could I ever forget this love. My love goodbye, who knows where we'll meet again…"

Xu Ping tilted to look at his brother. His face was half hidden in the shadows, his deep-set eyes, thick brows and sharp jaw line. The younger boy turned to face his brother with a gentle and focused gaze. The dim orangey light behind him surrounded his silhouette in a halo of gold like that of an angel.

Xu Ping's heart skipped several beats.

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[40] The same phrase is repeated in Chinese but with the "goodbye" at the end.

[41] Teresa Teng, amongst other non-Mainland singers, were banned in Mainland China because they were considered to promote anti-communism thought.

“Do you know what she’s singing about?”

Xu Zheng gazed at his brother without a word.

Xu Ping squinted before saying, “Well, you’ll…”

He didn’t finish. He wanted to say that you would understand the lyrics when you fall in love in the future, but then he realized his retard brother might not ever experience romantic love.

His own gaze filled with sorrow. His brother was a good-looking lad, even more so than their father in his youth. If he had a normal IQ, all the girls would go crazy for him.

Xu Ping flashed a forced smile at his brother.

“*Xiao*-Zheng.”

“Mhm?”

Would his brother fall in love with a girl?

Was it IQ or instincts that controlled whom one liked?

But he couldn’t ask. He didn’t want to think about his brother falling in love with someone and being heartbroken from not receiving anything in response. If it was going to be like that, he’d rather Xu Zheng stayed dumb and always be happy.

Xu Zheng looked at his brother who had called his name but had not spoken.

“Dummy!” Xu Ping rubbed his brother’s head roughly. “Don’t listen to stuff you don’t understand. Listening at home is okay, but you’ll get arrested for listening to it out in public. Got it?”

Xu Zheng shook his head.

“If you like Teresa Teng, I’ll buy you a few tapes. Don’t listen to the stuff on the radio again.”

Xu Zheng turned his attention back to the radio and spoke with a little lisp, “Good song. I like it.”

Xu Ping chuckled and put an arm around his brother.

How could Xu Zheng possibly understand the rules of the outside world when he lived in his own tiny one? The only ones who could protect him were Xu Ping and their father and no one else. But

in this moment, Xu Ping didn't want to disrupt the lovely song playing in his brother's peaceful world.

"Dummy," he replied quietly.

After several Theresa Teng's songs was the late night programme teaching English. The host was a man with a raspy voice. Xu Zheng didn't like his voice and changed the channel in a slightly dissatisfied manner.

Xu Ping stood up for a stretch. "Time to wash up and go to bed."

Xu Zheng carefully put the radio back into its case like the good boy he was.

It only took the newly installed boiler five minutes to get the water to a nice, hot temperature.

Standing outside the tub, Xu Ping instructed as he rolled up his sleeves, "Quick, take your clothes off. The water's almost ready."

Then he heard the soft rustling of fabrics from behind.

Xu Ping had his pant legs all rolled up when he turned to find his brother naked on top but struggling to unzip his pants.

"Here, let me," Xu Ping offered.

Thick, blue jean pants had become popular among the younger crowd recently and bell-bottoms became a style icon. With his height and long legs, Xu Zheng looked great in jeans.

Xu Ping tugged on the zipper, but it did not budge even a little.

After taking a closer look, he shouted almost immediately, "You asshole! How many times do I have to tell you? Always wear underwear before wearing jeans! Underwear, you understand?!"

Xu Zheng stared dumbly at his brother. "Oh."

Xu Ping wanted to drive his fist in the wall. "Oh? You say that every time! But you forget it as soon as you do! You're doing this on purpose, aren't you, Xu Zheng?!"

His brother made an innocent face like a puppy, "Too tight. Uncomfortable."

Xu Ping felt frustration beyond description. “And getting your hair stuck in the zipper is comfortable?! You’re just asking for it, aren’t you?!”

A silly smile appeared on his brother’s face.

“Ugh, alright. You wait here.” Defeated, Xu Ping went searching for the scissors.

He finally got the pants off after struggling with the hair and the pants. While he was battling with the zipper, he brushed his brother’s genitals several times, and soon it was erect. The penis was thick and long, the head a healthy pink. It made a small tent in the pants and peeked its head out from the top of the zipper.



Although his brain was that of a child’s, Xu Zheng’s body had matured. His testicles could produce sperm and was driven by hormones to reproduce like every other male on this earth.

Sweat dripped down Xu Ping’s forehead. His brother’s member was only inches away from his face, and he could smell the strong odor from Xu Zheng’s groin.

It hit Xu Ping that it wasn’t the pants that were too tight. It was his junk that was too big!

He glared at his brother only to meet the intent yet pure gaze of the younger boy, who was acting as though the swollen erection was not his.

“What are you looking at?” Xu Ping barked angrily.

Xu Zheng couldn’t sense that his brother was upset and replied seriously, “You’re good-looking.”

If he didn’t know his brother’s IQ, Xu Ping would have thought the younger boy was teasing him. His face flushed at the words, but he didn’t even know how to retort.

In the end, he commanded his brother to hold his hand in front of his own crotch. “Hold it!”

Xu Zheng held his own member while observing his furious brother struggling with the pant zipper.

Xu Ping had never been in such an awkward situation. He cursed silently as he yanked downward.

The zipper flew off and the pants could finally come off.

Xu Ping pushed the pants down to the floor. “Feet up.”

“The pants broke.” Xu Zheng sounded a bit sad.

Xu Ping wiped his sweat off with the back of his hand. “No, it’s not! I’ll put it back for you later.”

Xu Zheng was happy again.



Water began spraying out. Xu Ping grabbed the yellow showerhead and tested the temperature with a hand.

“Okay, get in.”

A naked Xu Zheng stepped into the tub.

Xu Ping quickly sprayed his brother’s torso. He looked up at his brother.

A bit angry, Xu Ping grumbled, “Put your head down.”

Xu Zheng crouched down with his arms around his knees.

Xu Ping wet his brother’s head before scooping a chunk of Seagull shampoo from its blue plastic container. He slapped it on his brother’s hair and began scrubbing.

Xu Zheng’s hair was short, but it was black, numerous and stiff, staying spiked even when wet.

Xu Ping clawed his brother’s scalp.

His brother had really grown up. His shoulders had become wide and muscle tone was starting to show on his back. Two years ago, Xu Ping could have easily won in an arm wrestle, but this year on Chinese New Year’s Eve, he had lost even after using all the strength he could muster.

Xu Ping glanced at his brother’s strong arms and then at his own. He sighed.

He raised the showerhead and rinsed the lather out of his brother’s hair.

“What did Dad say to you on the phone?” Xu Ping tried to make conversation.

Xu Zheng had his eyes tightly shut as the water splashed his head.

“Hi, *Xiao*-Zheng? It’s Dad. Did you have dinner? And what did you have? Did you like the ribs? Haha. Well, you have to thank your brother for that. I’ll be home in two or three days. You have to listen to your brother while Dad’s away, okay? Your brother’s busy these days, so don’t go bothering him. He needs to study for his exams. I’ll take you out to play when I come back. I’m in Yan’an right now, the place where our great President Mao stayed. I’ll bring back some local paper cut outs and you can stick them up on the windows. They’re really pretty. What pattern do you like, *Xiao*-Zheng? They got everything; cat, dog, donkey and even tree peony….”



Xu Ping listened to his brother repeat every word that their father had said like a tape recorder. He didn’t know how his brother did it. Aside from the lack of emotion, the sentences were almost exact replicas of the original.

How could anyone say he was stupid?

He patted his brother’s cheek lovingly. “Alright, the bubbles are gone now. You can open your eyes.”

Xu Zheng opened his eyes slowly and added unhappily, “Dad lied. I asked for one of *gege*. Dad said there are none.”

“Alright, don’t be mean to Dad.” Xu Ping chuckled. “I’ll cut one for you with some red paper and you can stick it up on the windows.”

“Okay.” Xu Zheng nodded delightfully.

All the feelings of frustration vanished at the sight of his brother’s adorably dumb expression. Xu Ping pulled his brother by the arm. “Stand up. Let’s clean the rest of you.”

His brother straightened up and held his fists on either side, keeping his body tense like an army drill.

Xu Ping clapped his shoulder, laughing. “Relax!”

The last bar of soap had been used up. Xu Ping took out a new bar of Bee & Flower sandalwood soap from Shanghai that was given to his father by the event organizer of a performance. He ripped open the paper packaging. The soap inside was a brownish red colour and exuded a strong and rich fragrance.

Xu Ping sprayed his brother with water again before rubbing the soap bar on the younger boy.

From the neck to the collarbone, from the chest to the stomach.

The abdomen muscles began twitching.

Xu Ping shot a look. “What’s wrong with you?”

Xu Zheng was standing with his body taut and his fists on either side. “It’s ticklish, *Gege*.”

“Tsk, what are you complaining about?” Xu Ping scolded. “Suck it up!”

He turned his brother around and began lathering the back.

Xu Zheng had the perfect body shape, an upside-down triangle made of broad shoulders, long arms and a slender waist. His butt was firm and round, and his thighs were strong and muscular.

As Xu Ping worked with the soap bar, he noticed that wherever he went, the muscles would start twitching. It was like throwing a pebble into water and watching the ripples spread.

“Are you really that ticklish?!” Xu Ping exclaimed.

He turned his brother around again to find his member standing up again.

With his hands full of lather, Xu Ping stared at the erection for a moment.

It seemed to have sensed his gaze and jerked joyfully, spitting out a few drops of clear liquid. One went as far as Xu Ping’s pants.

Xu Ping was quiet.

Veins were bulging out on Xu Zheng’s neck, and his face was red too.

“*Gege*,” he called.

“Do you feel bad?” Xu Ping asked.

Xu Zheng took a second to think before nodding.

“Do you know what to do?”

His dumb brother shook his head.

Xu Ping leisurely wiped the foam from his hands while replying, “I’ll help you.”

He pointed the showerhead at his brother’s crotch and opened the cold water.

“AGH!” Xu Zheng shot up like a spring. His little guy had already shrunken back into its bush, and the balls looked smaller too.

Xu Ping pushed his brother’s head down and showered him with cold water, making Xu Zheng howl.

Xu Ping didn’t care and held onto his brother’s neck while he scolded, “You damn little rascal! Don’t you ever dare do that again!”

Fifteen



"*He was asleep in a short time and he dreamed of Africa when he was a boy and the long golden beaches and the white beaches, so white they hurt your eyes, and the high capes and the great brown mountains. He lived along that coast now every night and in his dreams he heard the surf roar and saw the native boats come riding through it.*

–Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

When Xu Ping came out of the bathroom drying his hair with a towel, his brother was already lying on the bed with his back to him.

Their two single beds had been pushed together and stayed that way since the year Xu Zheng had run away from home.

It was a bit stuffy. Xu Ping unfastened the top two buttons on his pyjama shirt.

"*Xiao*-Zheng?" he called quietly.

Xu Zheng lay facing the wall.

Xu Ping sat down at the edge of the bed and placed a hand on his brother's shoulder.

The boy's muscle tensed and soon Xu Zheng shook the hand off.

Xu Ping chuckled. "Still mad?"

Xu Zheng wiggled his head into the pillow like an ostrich, leaving only a bare, muscular back for his older brother.

Xu Ping broke out in breathy laughter. He patted his brother's back. The slightly cool touch of his skin prompted him to shake out the blankets and pull them over his brother.

He turned off the tableside lamp and opened the windows just a crack so his brother could have fresh air while asleep.

After he had done everything, he stayed in the dark room gazing at his brother, at the gently rising and falling of the blanket-covered body, at his black hair and at the strong shoulders the blanket couldn't cover.



Xu Ping did not have a joyful expression on his face, though. He was frowning with his lips tightly pursed.

But this was hidden away by the silent darkness like all the other unknown secrets.

He sighed as he picked up his glasses from the desk and put them back on. Quietly, he grabbed his books and closed the door behind him as he left.

Outside of his periphery, Xu Zheng's head had bobbed up and then back down after hearing the door closed. Then, after a moment, he kicked the blankets off and rolled around like a poor, ignored puppy before lying back down facing the wall.

The lights in the living room were on even at one a.m. in the morning. The dining table was piled with mock tests and study materials. Other than the homework that the teacher had assigned, Xu Ping had a set of his own exercises to complete.

He had on dark blue cotton pyjamas as he worked away on the table.

The dining table was lower than the desk in his room, and the lighting wasn't that great either, so Xu Ping had to hunch lower. He

didn't feel it at the time, but by the time he looked up after finishing the exercises, his back and neck were very sore.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was already one-thirty.

Xu Ping rubbed his neck as he stood up. He had bad circulation, and his hands and feet were already cold and stiff after sitting for long periods of time. He pushed the books away, deciding to tidy up in the morning, and pulled on the light switch.

Everybody was asleep at this time. None of the lights were on in the building next door. The only illumination was the moonlight pouring through the windows.

Xu Ping carefully manoeuvred his way back to the bedroom. He slowly slipped under the covers after taking his shoes off by the bed and placing his glasses on the bedside table.

He felt his body relax, and just when he wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, he was suddenly caught in a hot embrace.

Xu Ping's heartbeat quickened and then calmed down. He recognized the manly body odor, like that of a young lion roaming on the prairies, surrounding him.

He patted his brother's arm. "Why are you still awake?"

Xu Zheng only wrapped his arms tighter.

"Did I wake you up?" Xu Ping asked in a tired tone.

Xu Zheng had always been a light sleeper and would wake at the slightest noise.

Xu Ping was exhausted. The last year of high school was rigorous, and he still had to take care of his brother. All he wanted to do now was to sleep until the next day, but his brother's smell and warmth hovered around him, keeping him awake.

He pushed on Xu Zheng a little and said softly, "Alright. Go to sleep. It's late."

Not giving up, Xu Zheng lunged forward and almost knocked the breath out of Xu Ping.

“What’s it with you?!” Xu Ping couldn’t help but become impatient that he couldn’t get his sleep.

Xu Zheng put his hands on either side of Xu Ping’s head as he gazed intently at his brother, whose eyes glistened like stars even in the dark.

Xu Ping was afraid of looking in these eyes. He wasn’t sure what he was afraid of. Perhaps the atmosphere today had been too suggestive. He looked away and repeated in a hoarse voice. “Alright. I’m really tired, and there’s lots to do tomorrow….”

He didn’t continue.

His brother grabbed Xu Ping’s hand and placed it against his chest. “*Gege*, your hands are cold. I warm them for you.”

Xu Ping stiffened and moments later, his nose began stinging. It took all his effort to keep his tears from falling.

Underneath his palm and the muscles of a young man, a heart was beating – boom boom boom. All the blood in his body came through here.

Xu Zheng put both of his brother’s hands on his chest and whispered, “I waited for you for so long, *Gege*.”

In the dark, Xu Ping’s eyes reddened. “Are you cold?”

Xu Zheng answered as he had years ago. “Yeah.” Then he pressed Xu Ping’s hands even harder against his own chest.

“Lie down beside me,” Xu Ping told his brother.

Xu Zheng lay down on the same pillow while holding his brother’s hands. The two lay face to face, close enough for each to feel the other boy’s breath against his own face.

Xu Ping looked right into his brother’s eyes.

“*Xiao*-Zheng.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll always be with you.”

Xu Zheng’s eyes widened, and then very, very slowly, a smile formed on his face.

"*Gege*."

"Yeah?"

"Do you not like me anymore?"

"What are you saying?" Xu Ping rubbed his brother's head. "Go to sleep."

He turned to the other side, and his brother hugged him around the waist from behind.

"*Gege*."

"Yeah?" Xu Ping said with his eyes closed.

"I feel weird lately."

Xu Ping burst out laughing. "You're not weird. You've just grown up."

"Grown up…what's grown up?"

Xu Ping held his brother's hands. They were very big with especially thick joints.

"Men get erections when they get to your age. It's normal. Nothing to be scared of."

He grabbed his brother's hand and led it down to his own crotch where his penis lay limp inside his underwear.

His brother's palm was hot, its temperature passing through his clothes to his member.

"It's usually limp here, but if it gets stimulated, like this…."

He used his brother's hand to gently stroke his own member. Soon the tissues filled with blood and began to harden.

He stopped his hand. "See, I'm the same, too. Every man gets hard, and if you can't get hard, then you're not a man."

Xu Zheng's breathing was heavy, sending warm and wet air against Xu Ping's neck.

He lay staring at the darkness in front of him without a sound.

"*Gege*," Xu Zheng called quietly by his ear.

Xu Ping did not answer.

Xu Zheng's arms tightened around him, and Xu Zheng began grinding his own erection against his brother.

"I don't feel good, *Gege*." Xu Zheng's voice was quiet and deep, the hoarseness of which was sexy beyond description.

Xu Ping reached around with a hand to find Xu Zheng all sweaty.

"*Xiao*-Zheng."

"*Gege*."

"Do you like cute girls?"

"Hm?"

"They have long hair, and they smell nice, and they're so soft hugging them feels like hugging a puff of cotton. They have nice, pale arms; big, round eyes; and a skinny waist. And their voice sounds like a songbird's."

With his head on his brother's shoulder, Xu Zheng thought for a long time.

"Liar. Girls are scary."

Xu Ping chuckled.

"You're still too young. Girls will be really nice to you in a few years when you're seventeen, eighteen, when you're even taller and even more handsome."

Xu Zheng mulled it over but didn't understand. "Oh."

He pulled his brother into his arms even closer.

"Do you like them, *Gege*?"

Xu Ping didn't answer for some time. "Yeah, I do."

With his arms around his brother, Xu Zheng added, "Then I like them, too."

Xu Ping paused and patted his brother's face. "Alright, let's go to sleep. All your worries go away in your sleep."

The younger boy had not given up quite yet, and Xu Ping spoke with his eyes closed, "Bear with it. I'm doing it, too. If you can't stand it, then we can always go for the cold water instead."

Hearing this made Xu Zheng think of the experience earlier with the cold water, and a shiver ran through him. Scared to tempt his brother, he covered his crotch with both hands and left the other boy alone.

A smile appeared on Xu Ping's face as he finally drifted to sleep.



Sixteen



"He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy. He never dreamed about the boy.

–Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

Xu Ping knew very well he was dreaming.

He saw the broken glass under his feet, the withered China roses in the planter box, and the blood red sunset.

He walked up the concrete staircase and gently pushed open a worn wooden door covered in green paint.

He saw his twelve-year-old self being held up by two other children as Lu Jia smashed a brick into his head.

"Better that he dies! Retard is in the genes! So when Xu Ping gets married, his son's gonna be just like his brother, all retards!"

"Liar! You liar!" He heard his young self screaming with anger.

"Me?! Your mom's an idiot, and she gave birth to another idiot! So what if they look good?! Hah! Their brains are made of mush!"

He lunged forward to throw a punch at Lu Jia, but the scene suddenly changed. The abandoned room turned into a tidy living room.

"What did you just say, Zhang Jinmin?! You say that again! Don't think I don't know about your dirty little secrets! I know what you're hiding in that book of yours! Take it out, I dare you! You disgusting–"

Slap!

Then, he heard the sharp shriek of a woman. "Did you just hit me?! Don't do disgusting things if you don't want people talking about it! The others may not know who you keep hidden in your heart, but I do! Go tell the Party you want a divorce! Go! I dare you! Tell them who you wrote that screenplay for! Tell them how Xu Chuan's role came to be! Hah, you thought nobody'd find out? You may look prim and proper, but are you really?! You disgusting pervert!"



The door slammed open with a bang. The two adults came out locked in battle as they exchanged insults. He Mei's hair was flying wild. Mr. Zhang's face was in a scowl.

"Shut up! Shut up! I'll kill you!"

Without much thought, Xu Ping took a step back.

Someone grabbed him from behind. Xu Ping turned his head to find his brother.

"I don't feel good, *Gege*," his brother said with a flushed face and a frown.

"What's wrong, *Xiao*-Zheng? Talk to me!" Worried, Xu Ping smacked his brother's face lightly.

In response, his brother began sucking on his neck as he caressed his chest and crotch.

"*Gege*, I like you. I want to do it with you. Give it to me, *Gege*."

He pushed Xu Ping down and began tearing at his clothes while rubbing his older brother's groin.

“Stop, *Xiao*-Zheng! We’re brothers. We shouldn’t….”

Xu Zheng tore off his brother’s underwear and took the older boy’s erection into his own mouth.

“Ahh!” Xu Ping let out a long moan in his dream. He had never felt so good before.

“No, *Xiao*-Zheng, stop this….” He tried pushing at his brother’s head as it hovered above his crotch only to find his arms weak and limp.

He watched as his brother spread his legs and swallowed him deep. The younger boy’s sweat dripped onto his stomach. He watched the beautiful back of his brother rise and fall.

He asked himself if he was dreaming.

He thought as he grabbed onto his brother’s short hair. *This is ridiculous. This is ridiculous.*

But he couldn’t bear to stop now.

He opened his own legs and propped his arms behind himself as he arched his neck back.

Fuck it…

He let his voice go free, even telling his brother to take him in deeper and suck him harder.

With his dick in his mouth, Xu Zheng took a glance at his brother before dropping down again.

The pleasure streamed up his spine like waves of electricity. He reached orgasm amid the death-like euphoria that threatened to suck dry even his bone marrow.

He watched as his brother wiped off the sticky whiteness from his lips before kissing him. The white t-shirt was wet with sweat and clung onto the beautiful, muscular body.

He French kissed with his brother, their saliva dripping down from their lips.

He heard his voice near his ears as his brother cupped his hands around his face: "You're not my *gege*, and I'm not your *didi*[42]…."

Ding-a-ling-ling!

Xu Ping sat up in bed, panting.

The Big Ben alarm clock was still ringing on his nightstand, and he smacked the top to silence it.

It was six o'clock exactly. The sky was still dim as the first rays burst forth in the night sky. The faint white sliver that was the moon was still visible against the pale blue back drop. He could hear the brushing sound coming from the street cleaners on the roads.



Xu Ping lay panting with his arms around the blankets. He touched his face to find his forehead covered with cold sweat.

His brother was still fast asleep on top of the blankets with a leg straddled on Xu Ping.

Xu Ping pushed the leg and the blankets off.

His crotch felt damp and cold. The sticky mess on his inner thighs felt like disgusting, squirming bugs, sending shudders down his spine.

He was sitting on the bed with his arms around his head when he suddenly jumped to his feet and shot towards the bathroom.

The door slammed closed so hard that the metal latch broke and tumbled down with a clunk.

Spitting profanities, Xu Ping began ripping his clothes off.

His pajama shirt and pants fell to the floor along with his underwear. He stepped into the tub and turned on the cold water without even drawing the shower curtain.

Icy water hit his skin before dancing to the bottom of the tub.

Xu Ping shivered as goose bumps began to form all over.

[42] Younger brother

With his hands on the white porcelain tiles, he let his hair get wet.

His mind was a train wreck, loud and obnoxious, but nothing could really get to him.

He wanted to drown into somewhere deep, somewhere without sound and worry, where he didn't have to ask himself why, or worry about tomorrow.

He turned the water higher as he closed his eyes.

The water quickly took away his bodily warmth. The burning sweat, the sticky fluid, all the dirty evidence was washed away.

The colder the water, the surer he was that he had become clean once more.

"*Gege*."

Xu Ping looked up, startled.

Xu Zheng was standing at the door wearing only underpants.

"What do you want?!" Xu Ping barked rudely.

Xu Zheng stared at Xu Ping.

Xu Ping drew the curtains sharply. "Can't you see I'm taking a shower?! Get out!"

Xu Zheng stood there for a moment before quietly leaving.

A turbulence rippled through the peace that Xu Ping had achieved. The cold shower had gone to waste.

He grabbed a towel to cover his lower half and brought the dirty clothing out with him.

Xu Zheng was sitting at the dining table with his head down. He immediately stood up when he saw his brother.

Xu Ping walked past him without sparing a glance.

"I need the bathroom," Xu Zheng said to Xu Ping's back.

Xu Ping stopped, barely turning his head around. "Why are you telling me that?! You still need me to help you go peepee?! Just go do it yourself!"

The atmosphere in the house was strange all morning.

Xu Ping was helping his brother with the shirt buttons when he put too much force into his hands and one button flew off, tinkling as it skittered across the floor and under the wardrobe.

"Fuck!" Xu Ping swore furiously as he yanked the shirt off from his brother.

Xu Zheng looked at his brother steadily for a moment before asking quietly, "What does fuck mean?"

Xu Ping glared up at his brother, unable to speak for some time. He would have planted one right on the smacker if it were a person with even the average amount of intelligence.

He tried to hold it in as he took out another grey shirt from the shelves. "Lift your arms."

Xu Zheng followed the command. He gazed down at his brother buttoning up his shirt for him and breathed in the nice smell belonging to his brother.

He never really knew how to read between the lines.

"*Gege*, what does fuck mean?"

Xu Ping glanced at Xu Zheng only to scoff out of anger. He thought about it for a second with his head tilted and lips pursed. "I'll show you later."

He took his brother out at six-thirty sharp. As long as the weather allowed, the brothers would go around the field of the nearby elementary school every weekend.

Xu Ping unlocked his bicycle, and just as his brother tried to hop on the back seat, he stopped him.

"Not today."

Xu Zheng stared back with big, dumb eyes.

"I ride the bike. You run. The elementary school field."

As he explained, he jumped on the vehicle and shot forward several metres before turning his head around, rushing the other boy impatiently. "Are you coming or not?! Hurry!"

Then, he sped off.

It took Xu Zheng a second to register the situation, but he quickly ran after his brother.

There weren't many pedestrians on the streets on a Saturday morning. The warm sunlight rained down on Xu Ping. The shops along the street had not opened for the day yet. Only the farmers who had come into town at the crack of dawn were hollering at passersby with their vegetables in baskets beside them.

Xu Ping spotted a middle-age lady walking her dog on the other side of the street. The golden retriever was sniffing around the base of the trees while its tail wagged back and forth.



Xu Ping took one glance back at his brother. His lips jerked a bit, and he pedalled faster.

The old man working at reception wasn't there, so Xu Ping rode right into the field.

The broom flowers were in full bloom; the stems were crawling with shiny golden buds. The jasmines had budded too, and soon their delightful fragrance will fill the entire schoolyard.

Xu Ping stopped by the 400 metre track. The sun had just risen.

He could hear his brother's footsteps as he leisurely pushed the bicycle to the bleachers.

"Don't stop. You usually run five laps, but today you have to do ten. I'll sit here and count for you while I memorize some vocabulary."

Xu Ping jumped onto the bleachers and took out his notebook after sitting down.

Xu Zheng stood panting.

"What, you got a problem?" Xu Ping looked up.

Xu Zheng shook his head and began running towards to the track paved with black gravel.

With his notebook in hand, Xu Ping started memorizing his list of vocabulary albeit half-heartedly.

“Athletic: related to sports; related to athletes; strong, muscular.”

The morning air was still a bit chilly. He sneezed and rubbed his red nose.

The sun rose from the east of the field. The green grass had been divided into boxes by white chalk lines, and goal posts stood on the two ends. A flag pole wide enough to hold with two hands was in the middle of the bleachers, and the national flag was billowing in the wind.

Xu Ping watched his brother run. The boy’s legs were long, and his muscles were evenly developed, both flexible and high in stamina. He ran like a healthy lion, and the sight was breathtaking even from afar.



Xu Zheng seemed to have noticed his brother looking at him and waved his arms wildly on the other side of the track.

Xu Ping ducked his head down as though he did not see that.

“Tight: to be (tied or stuck) close; hard to disentangle; dense.”

Xu Zheng finally came back to the bleachers, gasping for air, after Xu Ping had gone over the list twice. The shirt he was wearing was dripping with sweat.

“Done?”

Resting his hands on his knees, Xu Zheng nodded exhaustedly.

Xu Ping looked his brother up and down while tapping the notebook on his own thigh.

“Okay! Now give me forty push-ups!”

Xu Zheng looked up with an upset expression.

“*Ge*....” he groaned.

“I’m waiting.”

Xu Zheng bowed his head, and the sweat trickled down to the cement. He breathed out, bent down and put his hands on the ground.

“The posture’s wrong. Do it again.”

“Use your arms, not your hips. Do it again.”

“Why is your butt sticking out? I never taught you to do that! Do it again.”

The sweat was forming a small puddle underneath Xu Zheng. His short hair was wet like he had just come out of the shower.

Xu Ping criticized his posture relentlessly, making him redo the set because of the smallest mistakes.

When forty finally came along, Xu Zheng collapsed on the ground.

“Get up!”

Xu Zheng glanced at his brother and shook his head weakly.

“I’m so tired, *Gege*.”

Xu Ping crouched down by his brother.

“Do you want to know what fuck means?”

Xu Zheng nodded.

Xu Ping grabbed the other boy by the collar and straddled him. He stared right at Xu Zheng’s eyes and punched him in the face.

“Hit me back,” Xu Ping commanded flatly.

Xu Zheng shook his head.

Xu Ping threw another punch. This time Xu Zheng’s face flew sideways.

“Hit me back!”

Xu Zheng held his own face. “I won’t hit you, *Gege*.”

Xu Ping looked up at the sky for a second before showering his brother with more punches.

Xu Zheng’s arms were not enough to shield him. Xu Ping pushed his arms away and kept beating him. “Hit me back! Why won’t you hit me back?! Is it ‘cause it’s me?! You useless wuss. How many times do I have to tell you. Don’t take a beating for nothing. Why can’t you do that?! Take a punch! Hit me back! I didn’t make you run and train to be a wimp! Hit me back! It’s called self-protection, okay?! All animals know how. Are you so stupid you’ve forgotten?!”

Xu Zheng dodged left and right trying to escape. “I won’t! I am stupid! They say I’m a retard! I know it. I’m an idiot.”

Xu Ping froze. He grabbed his brother’s collar. “Who’s they? Who called you an idiot?!”

Xu Zheng turned his face away and didn’t speak.

Xu Ping dropped the younger boy back on the ground after waiting for some time.

“You’re not my brother. I don’t have a weakling for a brother.”

Before he even finished, Xu Zheng’s fist made him fall to the ground.



Xu Ping looked at his brother as he touched his bleeding lips.

Xu Zheng sat up using the steps nearby.

“Very good.” Xu Ping flashed a smile.

Xu Zheng watched him dumbly.

Xu Ping pushed himself up on the railing and spat out the blood in his mouth.

“*Xiao*-Zheng, I’ll tell you what fuck means. Fuck is a word we will never use with one another. If someone forces you to do something you don’t want to do, or if a man sits on you like I just did, you have to beat him until he begs for mercy no matter who that person is or how tired you are.”

“Also,” Xu Ping continued slowly, “Don’t let anyone call you stupid. Don’t let anyone tell you that you are different. We’re all dumb. We all have things that others don’t have. Xu Zheng is Xu Zheng, and you are a human being like everyone else. You’re all not much different from the rest of us.”

Seventeen



"*Power said to the world, "You are mine."*
The world kept it prisoner on her throne.
Love said to the world, "I am thine."
The world gave it the freedom of her house.

–Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*

Vroooom!

A blue and white tram revved its engine and drove past nearly a dozen bicycles waiting at the red light, whisking up quite a bit of dust in its wake.

A middle aged man waiting for the tram on the other side walked over. "Hello, young comrade. How do I get to the Municipal Party School from here?"

Xu Ping searched for the answer in his mind. "Take the No. 15 bus westbound for three stops."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The light turned from green to yellow, then from yellow to red.

Xu Ping pushed the ground with one leg and rode through the intersection on his bicycle along with the crowd.

His brother was holding onto his waist tightly. The boy's legs were too long, and he had to sit in a ridiculous, curled position.

His legs got sore after a while, and he had just put his legs down when his brother spoke.

"Lift your legs. Don't rub your shoes on the ground."

"Okay," Xu Zheng replied like a good boy.

The younger boy was growing very fast this year, and Xu Ping was starting to have difficulty bringing him along on the bicycle. He flexed his fingers and proceeded to put all his strength into pedaling.

"How does baozi sound for breakfast?"

Xu Zheng considered as he played with a corner of his brother's shirt. "Good."

The breakfast vendors had begun business for the day. Soy milk, fried doughnut, tofu dessert and red date cake, the delicious smells hit them in the face as they rode by.

Xu Ping stopped to the side and walked to the shop with a mountainous stack of bamboo steamers that had become dark with use.

"Could I get a dozen pork and bok choy?" he said to the owner.

The Xus were long-time customers of this baozi shop, and the owner was a die-hard fan of Xu Chuan. Two things hung on the wall that was less than ten square metres, a portrait of President Mao and a signed poster of one of Xu Chuan's movies.

The slightly chubby owner heard and came out from behind the curtain.

"Oh, it's you, Xu Ping," she exclaimed merrily.

"Good morning, ma'am," Xu Ping greeted with a smile.

"Your dad ask you to buy breakfast?"

"My dad's still filming out of town. It's just me and my brother. We were craving your baozi this morning."

A pitiful expression appeared on the woman's face. "My, my. How could he just leave two kids at home? One of them's about to

take the university exam, too!" Then, she turned to her short and skinny husband. "Hey, where's *Xiao*-Xu's baozi? Give the poor kids a few more."

Xu Ping waved his hand. "No, no. That's fine."

"No, it ain't fine!" The woman replied passionately before yelling at her husband again. "Why're you gettin' the ones on top? It's all cold! Get the fresh ones on the bottom!"

In the end, there were sixteen baozi in the paper bag. The woman wanted to put in two extra fried doughnuts, but Xu Ping quickly refused.

Xu Ping was touched by her generosity and reminded Xu Zheng to say thanks, too.

The woman looked the younger boy up and down. "Wow, you've grown quite a lot, haven't you! Look at this, even bigger than your brother. You're looking more and more like your dad. Gonna be one handsome fellow in a few years!"

Xu Zheng kept his head down and stayed quiet.

"He doesn't like talking to people," Xu Ping explained as he rubbed his brother's back. "Don't mind him."

The woman knew about the boy's condition and now felt even sorrier for these two brothers. She managed to get the doughnuts into the paper bag after all.

Xu Ping recognized the emotion in her face and accepted the gift with a smile. He pulled his brother along as he said goodbye.

"Is that your nephew?" asked a customer in the shop next door.

"Nephew? He's my godson!"

Xu Ping unlocked the front door and placed the bag of baozi on the dining table.

"Wash your hands before eating," he told his brother as he grabbed the kettle from the stovetop to boil the water.

It's almost time to change the gas, he thought to himself as he struck a match to light the stove.

He lifted the short blue cloth dividing the kitchen and living room to see his brother already sitting nicely at the table.

Xu Ping placed on the table the soy sauce and vinegar that he had prepared. "Show me your hands."

Xu Zheng flattened his palms in front of him. Xu Ping flipped them over and even inspected under the nails. "Okay. You can eat."

Xu Zheng was always particularly hungry after exercising, and soon half of the bag was devoured. Xu Ping had only eaten two before losing his appetite.

He pushed the bag closer to the younger boy. "All yours. Eat up."

He wiped the grease off his fingers and opened the curtains of the living room. The room immediately brightened up with dazzling light.

"Go take a shower after breakfast. You're going to learn to take it yourself. I won't be helping you from today on."

Xu Zheng took a bite out of the baozi in his hand and began chewing, cheeks stuffed round. He did his best to swallow but could not finish the half still in his hand.

"No more, *Gege*."

Xu Ping looked into the paper bag. "You only had seven. Are you sure you're full?"

Xu Zheng put the remaining half back on the plate.

Xu Ping put his hand on his brother's head, lips pursed in thought.

"All right. Go shower then, you smelly boy."

He grabbed the half-eaten baozi and took a bite.

"Do you know how? The shampoo is in the blue container. The brown bar is soap. The left knob is hot water and the right is cold. I'll help you get the temperature right. Wash your hair and then the

rest of your body. The towel is on the rack. And don't forget to close the curtains."

Xu Zheng kept his head low and didn't respond.

By the time Xu Ping finished eating the baozi, the water was boiled. The steam gushed out from the mouth and made a sharp whistling noise as it passed through the small hole on the lid.

Xu Ping closed the gas valve and poured the hot water into the green thermos on the counter.

He said seemingly casually to his brother, "*Da*-Zhi invited me to a game of basketball. Do you want to come with me?"



Xu Ping was sitting at the table doing a mathematics mock examination when he heard the water start splashing out into the tub.

He had his pen in hand for some time. The questions on the page seemed familiar, but his mind was blank.

He counted each line that the minute hand ticked past. Xu Zheng still had not come out after fifteen minutes.

He threw his pen onto the table and stood up so suddenly that the chair skidded back.

He ran to the bathroom and pushed open the door. The latch had been broken since this morning, and the door slammed onto the wall.

"*Xiao*-Zheng!"

His brother was sitting on the ledge of the tub with his head down. The hot water behind him was emitting waves of water vapour. The boy looked up dumbly and called, "*Gege*."

Xu Ping's nerves settled down, but his anger was ignited.

He shut off the tap and smacked his brother on the back of the head. "I told you to shower, not just sit there! You could've called for my help if you didn't understand something! You think water's free? You let it run for fifteen whole minutes!"

Xu Zheng looked rather happy to have been hit. He said "okay" and began taking off his clothes.

Xu Ping stood there watching his clumsy brother take off his shirt, undershirt, pants, and underwear. He saw his brother's wide, solid shoulders, strong arms, slim waist, full hips, long, muscular legs, and the sizable member lying limp in the bushes.

He whipped around to leave after standing dumbfounded.

He heard his brother calling him from behind and was determined not to be fooled again.

"Take your shower properly unless you want a beating!"

Just as he was about to step out of the bathroom, he heard the water start and a small noise from his brother.

His brain told him: "Don't be stupid. Xu Zheng will be fine." But he still turned to look.

His brother had opened the hot water. The scalding water was splashing onto his skin which had become red.

It was already too late when he pulled the younger boy away. Xu Zheng stared at his own arm dumbly as though he did not understand what the swelling bubbles on his skin were. He reached his right hand to touch it.

Angry and hurt, Xu Ping grabbed Xu Zheng's right hand. "Who told you to open the hot water first?! How many times do I have to tell you?! The cold side first! Cold side! Why the hell can't you remember that?!"

He twisted the hot side close and the cold side open before sticking his brother's arm under the shower head.

Xu Zheng shuddered and held his brother's hand tightly.

"You dumbass! Idiot!" Xu Ping couldn't bear his frustration. "You're so stupid! Can you be any stupider?!" Meanwhile, he blamed himself inside. It was all his fault.

He dragged his brother along out of the bathroom and to their father's bedroom. He found the green ointment[43] and plastered the burns with it, but even then he felt restless like a cat on hot bricks.

With his head tilted, Xu Zheng looked at his brother inspecting his arm in a nearly psychotic manner.

"*Gege*."

"What?!" Xu Ping shouted.

"It doesn't hurt at all."

Xu Ping looked up at his brother. His eyes were glimmering with moisture.

"You dummy," he said with a forced smile. "You don't even know what pain is."

Xu Zheng didn't care at all about his injury. He was just happy his gentle brother was back.

He waited in front of the kitchen sink for his brother to wash his hair for him like they had when he was younger. Only now, he was too tall to stand on the stool and had to bend his head down.

His older brother's fingers were long and cool. They felt like snowflakes melting on his nape when they massaged his scalp.

The windows by the sink were open. The sun was high up in the sky. Xu Ping could see the pots of green onions and sunflowers on the balcony of the home in the next building. He heard the neighbour singing along to the Peking opera, *Mu Guiying*, playing on the radio.

"The war drums thunder and bellow, waking the will and power in me to break the Heavenly Gates. Once upon a time, I had ridden my glorious warhorse, wetting my skirt with the blood of my enemies…."

He slowly poured a bucket of warm water over his brother's head.

[43] Lincomycin hydrochloride and lidocaine hydrochloride gel, a green ointment used for light degree burns, wounds and infections caused by insect bites.

The sunlight cut over the counter at a slant, casting the shadow of the window on the ground.

Xu Ping swished the towel in the water several times and wiped away the extra water on his brother's face.

Xu Zheng flashed a wide grin.

Xu Ping felt his face getting red and looked away.

Xu Zheng only had on a pair of square boxer briefs. He was sitting on the stool, waiting for his brother to wipe him down.



Eighteen



“X Daily, lies and blasphemy! You cheat the people, heartless scoundrels! ‘Tis not the time for revenge! But when it comes, the people shall avenge!”

When Xu Ping pedalled past the People’s Square with his brother sitting at the back, people had already gathered in the tens of thousands, totally blocking traffic. A short-haired woman wearing a grey jacket and holding a red loudspeaker was standing in front of a white banner as tall as herself, inscribed with large characters in red ink, passionately shouting the chant towards the sea of heads before her.

Directly west of the square was the city hall and next to it was the office of the major local newspaper, X Daily. A towering liberation commemoration plaque stood in the centre of the square, and on any other day, there would be flowers surrounding it. However, on this day the square was packed with people.

Stuck in a bicycle jam, Xu Ping hopped off like the other bicyclists and grabbed his brother’s hand. “It’s crowded here. You must not let go of my hand.”

The woman with short hair descended the podium, replaced by a skinny, tall guy.

“Yesterday we left off at the topic of democracy. What is democracy? From what I see, the ‘demo’ means ‘the people’ and ‘cracy’ means ‘power.’ We, the people, need to take power!”

An overwhelming round of applause and cheering exploded among the crowd.

Xu Ping was stuck to the spot as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

Xu Zheng abruptly grabbed his arm.

Xu Ping turned around to find even more people massing in the square, many of whom came on bicycles with red flags sticking out from the back on which were written the words "University of X!"

Xu Zheng was holding onto his brother's arm so tightly that his fingers sunk into the flesh.

"Don't worry. We're leaving now."

Pushing the bicycle, Xu Ping tried his best to squeeze through.

"Excuse me! Trying to get through!"

He pushed the bicycle with one hand while holding his brother's hand with the other.

There were many students wearing white headbands handing out leaflets. Written in black ink on their headbands were two words: 'HUNGER STRIKE.'

"Please support our cause!"

One of these students came into Xu Ping's path and thrust a leaflet in his face.

"The country belongs to the people, and we are the people. My fellow student, please feel it in your heart to help us!"

Xu Ping took the leaflet and scanned it – HUNGER STRIKE: A STATEMENT.

He pushed the student back a little. "Out of the way, please. We are in a rush."

He turned to look for his brother, and the boy appeared rather unsettled in the roaring crowd.

Xu Ping took his brother's hand, interlocking all ten fingers. "No matter what happens, don't let go!"

The two boys were half an hour late by the time they made it to the basketball court. Xu Ping locked the bicycle and saw a topless He Zhi running around after the ball. He found a stone bench under a shade tree for Xu Zheng to sit on.

He Zhi spotted Xu Ping and left the court after telling his teammates.

Xu Ping chuckled, “Sorry, *Da*-Zhi, we got stuck at People’s Square on the way.”

“I forgot to tell you.” He Zhi slapped his own thigh. “There’s been lots of students sittin’ in protest this week. All the roads are jammed.”



Xu Ping frowned without speaking.

He Zhi was a head taller than Xu Ping. He had an average face but was huge and stocky. His skin was dark with a bit of red tone as though he were burning coal.

He noticed Xu Zheng behind Xu Ping and leaned over to greet him. “Remember me, *Xiao*-Zheng? I’m *Da*-Zhi-*gege*. I used to go over to your house.”

It appeared as though Xu Zheng had not heard a thing.

Xu Ping kicked his friend. “What the hell are you saying, ‘*Da*-Zhi-*gege*?!’ “

Da Zhi rubbed his buzzcut and started laughing.

“Your brother still doesn’t like to talk, huh. I thought it’d get better with time.”

Xu Ping stopped in the middle of stripping and replied lightly, “He always has been and always will be like this.”

He Zhi rubbed his nose, realizing he should not have said that.

Xu Ping took off his shirt, leaving on the white tank top underneath. He slapped He Zhi on the back. “Okay. Let’s play ball.”

Compared to his friend, Xu Ping had much paler skin and was a lot thinner. His shoulder blades were painfully visible on his back. Though he was not very tall, his proportions were well-balanced.

Muscles hugged his bones snugly making him look like a skinny bamboo shoot.

"You look a lot skinnier than last time." With a frown, He Zhi asked, "Is the review takin' a toll on you?"

Xu Ping took a ball from He Zhi and dribbled it a few times. "That's the entrance exams for you. I've been pulling all-nighters lately, but it'll be fine after the exams." He passed the ball back to his friend and nodded, "So are we playing or not?"

The basketball court belonged to the City Iron and Steel Research Institute, and a number of youths from nearby came to play on Saturday afternoons. White paint marked the court on the cement. Lush willow trees planted along the road lined one side of the court, their branches and leaves swaying in the gentle breeze.

Xu Ping stretched his body, loosening his limbs and neck, and jumped in the spot. The wind in May was still chilly and made goose bumps rise all over his skin.

The golden sunlight was coming from behind the building to the west. Xu Ping squinted as he waved to his brother.

Bonk! The ball bounced off the backboard and spun on the hoop before falling to the ground.

Xu Ping wiped at the sweat on his head and rested his hands on his knees while panting for air.

One of the players on the other team signalled to He Zhi and hollered, "We still got plans. Let's stop here."

He Zhi nodded and went to fetch the ball that had rolled out of bounds.

He brought Xu Ping along to sit down on the stone bench at the side. He took a water bottle from his backpack and took a sip before handing it to Xu Ping.

Xu Ping had sweated so much that his face was a bit pale. He took the bottle and chugged several mouthfuls. Then he dumped the little bit left over his head and ran his fingers through his short hair.

"Thanks," he said, handing the bottle back to his friend. "I always end up drinking your water."

"Don't mention it." He Zhi chuckled. "I haven't seen you in ages. You've been super busy since you entered senior high. Can't even get you to come out for a game."

Xu Ping crossed his arms and rested them on his thighs as he smiled looking up. "If it were anybody else, I wouldn't, but if it's you, I'd come out no matter what."

He Zhi laughed cheerfully.

The two friends fell silent. Xu Ping turned to look at his brother who was sitting like an elementary student with his palms flat on his thighs and head bowed forward. Relieved, Xu Ping turned back around.

"You have to hand in the application form at the end of this month, don't you? What schools are you aimin' for?"

Xu Ping watched some young men running on the basketball court. "I haven't decided yet."

He Zhi considered for a moment before saying reassuringly, "I'm not worried about you, though. You got good grades, so you'll get in any school you apply to. Back in junior high, you even got into the provincial senior high that was one of the hardest schools to get into. My mom nagged me for three whole days, askin' me why I wasn't more like you."

Xu Ping turned to look at his childhood friend.

He Zhi broke off a section of a willow branch above his head and swung it around for fun.

"How much did you score on the city-wide mock exam?"

Xu Ping said a number.

"Goddamn!" He Zhi swore.

He lowered his head in shame. “You’d have no trouble with the rank one schools. If you do well on exam day, you could even go to Tsinghua or Peking University. It’ll be hard for us to meet after you go to Beijing.”

“Quit your bullshit,” Xu Ping retorted calmly.

He Zhi chuckled and let out a sigh facing the sky. “My dad was right. I’m just not meant for school. Honestly, I barely got half of what you got on the mock exam. University is probably out of my reach, but my brother-in-law’s a police officer for the city. Through his connection, I’ll go to police academy and become a police officer after I graduate.



“What’s so bad about becoming a police officer?” Xu Ping lectured. “It’s an honourable job, and a lot of people want to but can’t become one. Plus, you’re a big guy with some great moves. You’ve always liked to stick your nose into other people’s beeswax, and you can’t even stay seated in a chair. You were born to be a police officer. It’d be a loss on the police department’s part if you didn’t join, and the people would surely rise in protest, too!”

He Zhi burst out in laughter. He slapped Xu Ping’s shoulder, asking. “Since when were you such a good talker?”

Xu Ping flung his friend’s hand off. “I’m being serious. Nobody has time to cheer you up!”

He Zhi sighed. “Well, you’d find out sooner or later, so I thought the sooner I tell you, the sooner I could get it off my chest.”

Xu Ping shot his friend a look. “What, don’t tell me you have stress, too?”

He Zhi only smiled.

“Oh, right, guess who I saw the other day, Ping-*zi*?”

“Who?”

“Our classmate from elementary, your arch-nemesis, Lu Jia!”

Xu Ping barely blinked and replied with an unenthusiastic “Huh.”

“The guy’s an entire different person. I didn’t even recognize him at first, but his square face and thick eyebrows are still the same. He just looked so dangerous, not like someone our age, you know.”

This intrigued Xu Ping. “What is he doing now?”

“His dad was dragged out of office during the *yanda*[44] a few years ago, and his mom divorced his dad, taking his little brother with her. His grades weren’t good enough for senior high, so after junior high, he started a construction company with a relative. Now they’re going around buying up farmer’s properties.”

Xu Ping raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t say, he seems to have it goin’ good for ‘im. A gold chain ‘round his neck, a cellular phone in his hand. My dad and brother-in-law invited the admin of the police academy for a meal at the most expensive restaurant in town, and that guy was sittin’ at the table beside us, speaking fuckin’ Cantonese. Can you believe that?”

Xu Ping started laughing, too.

“Lu Jia speaking Cantonese?”

“Believe it or not! I didn’t even recognize him. He came up to me first and even drank a round with everyone. That guy’s got some tolerance to be drinking *baijiu* like water. His face didn’t even turn pink. He even gave me a card, that little bastard. It was fancy as fuck, had damn perfume and gold embossed shit. Said he was vice manager of some real estate company.”

“Which company?”

“I can’t remember, but he ain’t the big player. It’s his uncle or whoever. Heard my brother-in-law say his uncle won the city bid to build the intercity highway.”

Xu Ping nodded.

“Oh right, he asked about you, too. Says he wants to take you out for lunch some time and asked for your number.”

[44] Campaigns by the Chinese government to combat high crime rates and civil unrest.

“What?” Xu Ping exclaimed. “Lu Jia wants to eat with me?!”

“Uh-huh, I was surprised, too. He hated you the most back then, had the most bones to pick with you, and he even bullied your brother. Now he’s acting like you two are best buds. What a load of horseshit!”

“And you gave him my number?”

“Hell, no! I told’im I forgot and left it at that. If you wanna take him up, I’ll get into contact with him.”

Xu Ping thought about it with his nose crinkled up before asking, “What do you reckon Lu Jia has to do with me?”

He Zhi replied with a frown, “Not sure. But I have to warn you. He isn’t the same Lu Jia we knew from elementary. You have to be careful ‘cause he isn’t one of us.”

Xu Ping flicked away the branch that fell on his head. “I know. I’ve known what kind of person he was since I was twelve.”

He took a glance at his brother again.

“I don’t want to see him. If he asks for me again, get him off my back for me.”

He Zhi nodded.

Nineteen



The two friends sat for a while in silence.

Recalling the leaflet from earlier, Xu Ping fished it out from his pocket and began reading it.

"The country belongs to the people, and we are the people. Who will call out if not us? Who will act if not us?

"Democracy is the highest form of existence, and freedom is a right we humans hold from birth, but must we exchange our youthful lives in return for them? Is this what we, the Chinese people, hold as pride?

"Mother China, take a look at your sons and daughters! Hunger is ravaging their youth, and death is pushing towards them. Are you going to stand by and watch?"

"What's this?" He Zhi asked.

Xu Ping passed the leaflet over.

"Somebody gave it to me when I passed by the square."

"Are you participating?"

Xu Ping shook his head.

"When I passed by, I saw a guy standing on the steps of the memorial plaque leading thousands of people below in a chant. You're not going to believe it, but I knew him. He graduated from my school."

"Really? Who?"

“Huang. Huang Fan. A year above me. I was a member of the student council in the first year. He was head of communications and later became president. Whenever the student council organized things like speech contests or singing competitions, he’d lead us during the process. When I heard his voice today, I recognized it straight away. He got into University of X last year, and I even asked him for study materials. That was a couple months ago. I didn’t think I’d see him in the middle of it all.”

“You didn’t go say hi?”

“I had Xu Zheng with me. What if I had lost him? Plus, there were so many people the entire square was packed.”

“That many?”

“Yeah, and more were trying to join. I’d say there were over ten thousand.”

He Zhi nodded. “For the past few nights, I’ve seen university students going on protests with torches in hand when I get up for a piss. Not only students. A lot of workers from the factory where my sister works are joining to protest the corrupt bureaucracy and crazy inflation or whatever. My brother-in-law’s been so busy he hasn’t come home. With so many people protesting, the police force has been stretched thin. They’ve even stopped all criminal investigations. Every officer has to follow the same orders.”

He looked down at the leaflet.

“Strikers’ demands: 1) a sincere, concrete, and equal conversation between the university student representatives and the government as soon as possible, 2) a new, unbiased name for the student movement and confirmation that it is a patriotic and democratic student movement.”

“They’ve been on hunger strike for almost a week, right?”

Xu Ping hummed in affirmation. “A lot of universities have stopped lessons. The News Simulcast has been reporting nothing but this.”

“I wonder how this will end. I actually wanted to go, but my dad and brother-in-law wouldn’t let me no matter what. My sister even beat me up when she found out, said I’m an unappreciative little shit who’s going to get my brother-in-law in trouble. So I gave up that idea.”

“Your brother-in-law is really good to you, finding connections for you and all. You really shouldn’t make any trouble for him.”

“And what ‘bout you? You even know the leader of the students!”

“Yes, I’ll go and just leave Xu Zheng at home?!” Xu Ping retorted sarcastically.

“I’ve wanted to say this for a long time, Ping-*zi*. You put your brother too high up on your priorities. What about your life? You ever thought ‘bout that? Your brother’s almost sixteen, and he’s taller than you. Strangers would think he’s the older of the two! Sure, he has some problems with his head, but you’ve done enough. You can’t waste your whole life for him, can you?”

Xu Ping did not respond. He picked up the basketball from the ground and beckoned to his brother.

“*Xiao*-Zheng, come here. I’ll teach you how to play.”

“Spread your fingers, but don’t strain them. Very naturally, form a net. Good, like this.

“Now hold the ball with the thumb, index and middle fingers. Don’t let your palm touch the ball. Rather than holding the ball, it’s like the ball is being suction-cupped by your fingers.

“Now lift the ball with your right arm until your arm forms a right angle, like this.

“Very good. Now you can shoot. Use the wrist of your right hand for power and the index and middle fingers for aim. Your left hand just has to steady the ball and not interfere with the right hand….”

Slouching on the bench, He Zhi watched as his friend patiently taught his brother how to shoot a basketball.

Xu Zheng was very tall and handsome. When he had his eyes cast downwards, he looked completely normal, but from his slow reaction time, one could easily tell this boy was far from normal.

Bang! The basketball bounced off of the backboard straight down to the ground.

"Great stance, but too much force. Remember to use your wrist, not your arm, like this." Xu Ping held his brother's right hand and slowly went through the motions. "Feel that? Use your wrist to push the ball out."

Xu Zheng nodded.

Xu Ping smiled and then fetched the ball back, placing it back into his brother's hands.

"Try again?"

Time and time again, the ball hit the backboard and fell to the ground. He Zhi watched as Xu Ping fetched the ball again and again and averted his gaze.

He didn't know how Xu Ping persevered all these years – taking care of the retard brother every day, teaching him to eat, to dress, taking him to school, playing with him. Just seeing his friend shoulder these burdens made He Zhi feel exhausted.

Clank! The ball rolled along the rim and for the first time, fell through the hoop.

Xu Ping began clapping and cheering for his brother.

As he patted his brother's back encouragingly, he turned to He Zhi with a proud smile. "Hey, look, isn't he clever?"

He Zhi quickly nodded in agreement.

Xu Zheng wasn't looking in his direction at all. Head slightly tilted, he was watching his older brother with all the attention he could give, his gaze focused and affectionate. The afternoon sun rained down making his body glow. Xu Ping swung an arm around the boy and said something to him. The two brothers appeared to be

surrounded by an invisible bubble separating them from the rest of the world.

The sweet atmosphere felt oddly harmonious to He Zhi as though something crucial were happening right before his eyes, and he could not see it. He then studied the two for a long time but found nothing.

He had always respected this friend of his. He thought that although Xu Ping had a smaller body, he was brave and responsible like a real man. His mother died, and his brother was a retard. If it were any other kid, they would have given up long ago, but He Zhi had never heard a complaint from Xu Ping. If he were honest with himself, He Zhi knew he did not have it in him to commit even one-tenth of the love and patience that Xu Ping had given to Xu Zheng.



He Zhi shook his head and pushed the peculiar feeling away.

Xu Ping picked up the ball, lifted himself up onto his toes and shot the ball through the hoop beautifully. He did not have the stamina, but he had the intuition and skill.

He Zhi recalled the first time the two of them played basketball in junior high and the older kids passing by laughing at them.

It went by so fast. They were all grown up now and soon would go their separate ways without knowing when they would meet again.

He Zhi felt a sudden pang of sorrow. He crumpled the leaflet into a ball and left the bench dusting his butt.

“Hey, Ping-*zi*, let’s play another round. One against two, you and your brother on one team. How ‘bout it?”

“We’re not scared of you! Give us your best shot!”

Twenty



"*The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.*

–Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*

"I am a wolf from the North, roaming the boundless plains; the cold wind roars and the sand storm blows…"

The music woke Xu Ping making him sit up at his desk.

A few boys in the class had gathered around a desk in the corner listening to "Wolf" by Chyi Chin on someone's cassette player.

It was break time between lessons. All the desks were piled with study material and mock exams. Looking down from the podium, they looked like fortresses built with paper. The course load in the final year of senior high was heavy, and many students were taking the opportunity during break to catch a few snoozes in their own book fortress.

"Xu Ping, the homeroom teacher wants to see you in her office."

Xu Ping replied okay as he stood up rubbing his face.

Pushing open the wooden office door, he found Mrs. Li sitting at the desk in the corner marking the mock exam papers from yesterday.

"You were looking for me, Mrs. Li?"

Li Xiuyun pushed her glasses[45] higher on her nose and said without stopping her pen, “Yes, you.”

She flipped through the pages counting the red minuses on each one and with her red pen wrote “76” on the first page and two lines under the numerals.

After she put the pen down, she looked through the stack of already graded papers to find Xu Ping’s. She laid it on the desk and stabbed at it with her finger.

“What’s wrong with you? How did you make such an elementary mistake?!”

Xu Ping picked the exam up and looked at the question circled in red.

“You solved the most difficult questions at the end, so how did you get the simple fill-in-the-blanks wrong?!”

Xu Ping put the paper back down and chuckled, “It was a careless mistake.”

“Careless!” Mrs. Li stabbed the paper again. “Careless won’t help you in the entrance exam! Do you know how many students in this province are trying to squeeze past the line? A one point deduction means you fall fifty, one hundred spots down the scale! You’re a smart young man, Xu Ping. Don’t let your future go to waste because of a bad habit like this!”

Xu Ping nodded and agreed profusely.

Li Xiuyun removed her glasses and hung them around her neck. “Let’s leave the exam for now. It’s Friday already. Almost everybody has turned in their application form, but I haven’t seen yours.”

Xu Ping did not respond.

“You can talk to me if you have any troubles. I know your family background is special, but the application is a very serious

[45] Specifically ones to correct farsightedness.

matter, and you must treat it with utmost care. I had a talk with your dad on the phone the other day. With your scores, you can go to a very good school, maybe even Peking or Tsinghua. But I get the feeling that you have no such ambitions. Other kids are doing everything in their power to get into university while you are here hesitating when you already have one foot in the door."

Xu Ping rubbed his nose.

"Your dad told me about your situation, said you've been taking care of your brother since you were young. I was very touched by it. I'm fifty this year and have been teaching all my life. I've seen all types of students, and I have children of my own. I say this not as your teacher but as your elder, as someone with more life experience. Your dad spent all these years raising you not to become a good-for-nothing who only knows to care for your brother! Sure, you're not wrong to do so, but if you give up your own precious future for your brother, then you are the biggest fool in the world!"



Xu Ping's hands tightened for a moment around the side seams on his pants.

She pulled open the drawer and took out a stack of application cards. "I'm not supposed to show you this, but take a look at what Yang Qing wrote. His mock scores are lower than yours, but he was brave enough to put Peking as his first choice. What about you? Don't you have any ambition in you?"

Xu Ping pursed his lips.

"I'm not asking you to try for Peking, but Xu Ping, as your homeroom teacher, I will not allow you to take your future lightly." She slammed the drawer shut. "I want the application by Monday. Think about my words this weekend."

It was already late by the time Xu Ping ended school. Lessons ended late almost every day in the third and last year of senior high school.

Both the students and the teachers were stressed and wanted more hours in a day.

Throwing his deadweight backpack into the front basket, Xu Ping hopped on his bicycle and rushed off. By the time he arrived at the gates of the City's School for Special Education, the sky was pitch black.

Only a handful of windows still had light shining through. Xu Ping climbed the stairs two or three steps at a time to find his brother, back straight and knees together, sitting alone in the empty classroom.



"*Xiao*-Zheng."

Like a robot that was suddenly activated, his brother's head slowly turned around.

Xu Ping flashed a smile. "I'm here to pick you up."

Xu Ping took his brother by the hand and brought him to say goodbye to the teacher, Mrs. Cao, who was tidying up her materials in the office.

"Has your dad come back yet?"

"Not yet."

Mrs. Cao pointed to the bench in front of her. "Not so fast. I have something to talk to you about."

Xu Ping sat his brother down before joining him.

"How is it at home these days?"

"Fine. It's just that I'm about to take the university entrance exam, and there's a lot to do. My dad is still out of town filming and won't be back for a few more days."

Mrs. Cao nodded.

"Did my brother do something today?" Xu Ping probed.

"No." Mrs. Cao smiled. "Xu Zheng has always been very well-behaved in school. He doesn't like interaction, but he doesn't cause any trouble for us."

Xu Ping glanced at his brother, feeling slightly more at ease.

“Well, I think this is a matter I should discuss with your dad, but after some thought, I decided you should know, too.”

Xu Ping leaned in a little. “Yes, Mrs. Cao?”

Hands criss-crossed at the knee, Cao Xue began softly, “It’s been eight years since Xu Zheng came to our school. Have you considered what he will do in the future?”

Xu Ping fell silent.

“Xu Zheng is fifteen already. If he were a normal kid, he’d be planning his future after junior high graduation, whether that’s heading to senior high and university, or enrolling in a college and finding a job. The mandatory education in our country is nine years. Our special ed program doesn’t follow the same guidelines, but it won’t continue to available forever.”



“Mrs. Cao, is the school budget running low? I can talk to my dad about it.”

Cao Xue chuckled. “Our budget is never enough, and there are far more children that need special help than we can take in, but as of now we can still pull through.” She gazed at Xu Zheng warmly. “I remember Xu Zheng was only this tall when he first came. You and your dad brought him here. He was clinging onto your hand when you two left and wouldn’t let go no matter what. You told him you’d pick him up after school, so he sat by the plants in front waiting for you. It was raining hard that day. Mr. Zhang and I were trying to bring him into the classroom, but he bit anyone who tried to touch him, even made Mr. Zhang’s hand bleed. In the end, there was nothing we could do, so I got an umbrella and waited outside with him.”

Xu Ping patted his brother’s head.

“Sorry for causing you so much trouble.”

“Well, it wasn’t trouble, really. I was thinking at the time that this boy was a loyal and devoted soul. A lot of people think that children with mental disorders don’t understand a thing, but that’s

not true. They have feelings, too. They can feel joy and sorrow. They can sense who is good to them and who loves them."

Head lowered, Xu Ping gently rubbed his brother's hand.

"That's why I know Xu Zheng and I have a special connection. Our school isn't open to the general public nor is it non-profit. Our monthly tuition is not low, and many families who truly need help aren't able to send their children to our special ed program due to financial reasons. It's not that we don't want to help them, but we can only do so much."

"Is the tuition increasing next month?"

Cao Xue shook her head.

"Xu Ping, your brother is the oldest kid here. It shames me to say this, but we special needs educators can't do a whole lot. These kids mostly live in their own world, like a house with no doors. We can only do repairs from the outside, but we have no way of going in and turning on the lights."

"No, that's not true. You and the other teachers have done a lot, Mrs. Cao."

Cao Xue smiled.

"I like Xu Zheng very much, but the school can't become his parents. We can't take care of him forever. There comes an end to every party, Xu Ping, and you need to start considering Xu Zheng's future for him."

Twenty-one



"*It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.*

–Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*

One hand on the bicycle, one hand holding his brother's hand, Xu Ping ambled along the lightless street.

The night had swallowed up the last glow of twilight at the edge of the horizon, and tiny stars were twinkling weakly in the sky.

"What did you do at school today?" Xu Ping asked gently.

"Read."

"What did you read?"

Xu Zheng answered after some thought, "The Little Mermaid."

"Is that right? Would you tell me the story later?"

"Okay."

It was the last weekend of May. Spring was coming to an end. The crabapple[46] flowers had fully bloomed and were quietly shedding their lifeless petals, letting them fall to the dirt. A new round of life was itching to burst upon the streets and alleys of the

[46] *Malus halliana*

city. Baby oleander buds had formed, and the slender leaves seemed to have been coated with a layer of green fatty gloss in preparation for this year's burning summer sun.

Xu Ping stopped in front of a knife-cut noodle house and looked at the menu on the wall.

"I didn't buy groceries today, so let's eat here, okay?" Xu Ping turned to ask in a slightly tired voice.

The shop was not large, but the seats were clean.

The enthusiastic owner was quick to act. Seeing the new customers sit down, he brought over tea and appetizers – a plate of peanuts and a plate of spicy cucumber.

"Two noodles with beef tendon. One spicy, the other not spicy with extra onion and cilantro.

After taking down the order, the owner went towards the kitchen in the back.

Xu Ping slid two pairs of single-use chopsticks out from the bamboo holder, split one pair and carefully picked off the wood splinters before passing them to Xu Zheng. "Must be hungry, eh? Here's some appetizers for now. The noodles are coming soon."

He pushed the two plates towards his brother.

Xu Zheng held the chopsticks clumsily and with wobbly hands picked up a single peanut, bringing it to Xu Ping's mouth. "Here, *Gege*."

Before Xu Ping could open his mouth, the peanut fell and bounced off the table to finally roll onto the floor.

Xu Zheng bent down to pick it up, but Xu Ping grabbed his hand and said, "It's dirty now. We'll leave it."

He waved at the owner and asked for a soup spoon which he stuck into his brother's hand. "A spoon's easier."

Xu Zheng filled the spoon with peanuts and held it up to his brother's lips.

Xu Ping turned his head and rejected softly, “You eat it. I don’t like the skin.”

Xu Zheng paused for a moment before saying, “oh.” He then put the spoon down and started peeling the peanuts with those clumsy hands of his.

Xu Zheng had long fingers with nails trimmed close to the base. As he closed his fists, blue veins popped up on the back of his hands. He was wearing a white round-neck T-shirt that stretched thin around his wide shoulders. As he looked down, it did little to hide his slender, well-toned neck.



Xu Ping gazed at his brother in silence as a slightly bitter yet slightly sweet emotion filled him.

“*Xiao*-Zheng.”

“Hm?” His brother looked up from the peanuts in his hand.

He started to speak but was interrupted.

“Xu Ping?” He felt a firm hand on his right shoulder.

Surprised, he whipped around.

A tall, skinny man stood behind him. Monolid, slanted long eyes. Average length hair. White shirt and blue jeans. His separate facial features were not very significant but when put together exuded a unique charm.

“President Huang?”

The man smiled. “I’ve graduated for how long now? I’m not the student council president anymore. Don’t be so formal, and just call me Huang Fan.”

Xu Ping quickly stood from his seat. “What are you doing here?”

Huang Fan nodded his head towards the back. “Here for dinner with some friends. We’re sitting further inside so you probably didn’t see us when you came in.”

Xu Ping looked in his direction and saw three people sitting at a square table in the back corner, one of which was the short-haired woman who was shouting chants the other day at the square.

With a hand on the younger man's shoulder, Huang Fan took a good look up and down. "Haven't seen you in two months. The review must be tough, huh? You look a lot thinner than when I last saw you."

Xu Ping replied bitterly as he rubbed his eyebrow, "My friend said the same thing. But who doesn't lose a few pounds before the entrance exams? It'll be fine after July."

Huang Fan patted his shoulder. "You'll do fine. I have faith in you. Which school are you applying to?"

"I haven't decided yet." Xu Ping said crinkling his nose and casting his eyes down.

"Let me know if you want to apply to my school." Observing the younger man's expression, Huang Fan suggested, "I know the people in the school, and it's close to your home. If you end up coming, it will be same as before. I can keep an eye out for you."

Xu Ping pulled a smile but did not reply.

"Who's this?" Huang Fan asked cautiously, moving his gaze to Xu Zheng.

"My younger brother."

Huang Fan studied Xu Zheng for a second before smiling again. "It's my first time meeting your brother. Your family is really good-looking. Needless to say, your dad's an actor, but you two brothers stand out in a crowd like a flashlight in the dark, too."

Xu Ping awkwardly pushed his glasses.

Huang Fan leaned in for a closer look. "Those aren't prescription glasses, are they?"

Surprised, Xu Ping took off the glasses. "Great observation. It's the first time anyone found out by themselves. I had an accident and hurt my left eye. When my vision started declining I started to wear glasses, and then I got used to them so I'm still wearing them even now that my vision has recovered."

Huang Fan calmly stared at Xu Ping's face for a while before nodding with a smile. "They're nice on you."

Xu Ping put them back on his nose. "Actually I saw you a few days ago speaking through the loudspeakers at the People's Square. I was passing by but didn't say hi because of the crowd." Then, after a pause, he asked in a lower voice, "Aren't you supposed to be on hunger strike?"

Huang Fan's face fell. "We stopped. Everybody would starve if we didn't. The purpose of the strike was simply to show the government our determination for our request for democracy."

Xu Ping didn't know how to respond.

"So you already knew." Huang Fan cracked a bitter smile. "I hadn't contacted you lately because I was organizing the protest."

Seeing the man's drained expression, Xu Ping inquired, "What is it?"

Huang Fan thought about it for a moment. "It's a long story. It's good that we all have dreams and passion, but we have nowhere near the amount of money required for an event this large. The student body might look big, but the infighting is severe. There are a few leaders all on different sides, and nobody would listen to anyone else. There are even those who are here to gain fame for themselves. The hunger strike wasn't done in the name of the Union either, but in the name of individuals. A while ago, some even wanted to restart the lessons. I had to send in the disciplinary team to block off all the lecture buildings to stop them. If not, the group would have fallen apart."

Somewhere deep inside, Xu Ping knew something was off, but he only frowned.

Huang Fan returned it with a smile. "No need to worry about me. I still have bigger dreams to achieve. An obstacle like this won't get in my way."

“Isn’t your dream for China to achieve democratization?” Xu Ping asked, “What’s more important than that?”

But Huang Fan did not answer. His friends got up and paid the bill, and Huang Fan waved at them.

“It was nice running into you. Unfortunately we can’t talk much today. I collected some test questions and mock exams from previous years from my classmates. Come pick them up when you have time, or I could deliver them to you, too.”

Now Xu Ping was truly touched.

“I’ll go get them. Don’t want to trouble you.”

Huang Fan squeezed his shoulder lightly. “I told you not to be like that with me. Prepare well for the exam, and we’ll celebrate afterwards.”

Without waiting for Xu Ping’s reply, he turned and quickly left the noodle shop disappearing into the night.



Twenty-two



"Then they began to climb and they were going to the East it seemed, and then it darkened and they were in a storm, the rain so thick it seemed like flying through a waterfall, and then they were out and Compie turned his head and grinned and pointed and there, ahead, all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that there was where he was going.

–Ernest Hemingway, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*

"Please come again soon!"

The glass door closed behind them. With his stomach full of hot food, Xu Ping felt warm and lazy as though he were in a steamy sauna.

"Let's go home." Xu Ping turned around to tell his brother.

"Okay."

The moon was especially bright tonight, and with the fragrance of jasmines hovering in the evening air, the ground seemed to be covered with a thin layer of snow. Although the past week had been tough and the following week was not going to be any easier, Xu Ping felt content for the brief period of rest.

As he unlocked the bicycle lock, he asked, “Do you want to ride the bicycle home or walk home?”

Xu Zheng kept his head low in contemplation.

Xu Ping looked up at the moon and said, “We haven’t taken walks in the evening for a long time. Let’s take a walk and digest some of this food.”

Without a peep, Xu Zheng reached forward to grab his brother’s hand.

The younger boy’s hand was different from Xu Ping’s in that it was constantly warm. Once upon a time, Xu Ping could easily wrap the boy’s fist in one hand, but now he had the impression that he wouldn’t be able to break free from the hand around his fingers.



When did his baby brother get this big?

“We haven’t measured your height and weight in a long time. Remember to drop by the health clinic next time we pass it.”

“Okay.”

He had taken his brother around on the back of the bicycle ever since he could remember, but recently he was beginning to find it taxing. He could no longer go over a hill by stepping harder on the pedal but instead had to let Xu Zheng off and walk the hill together.

Xu Ping put a palm flat on Xu Zheng’s shoulder and eyeballed his height. “I think you grew again this month. My head reached your eyes before, but now it’s only at your nose. If this goes on, you’ll hit six feet before the end of summer.”

Xu Zheng took his brother’s hand from his head and placed in against his own chest.

After a moment of faltering, a bashful Xu Ping gently pulled his hand back.

“Okay, it’s getting late now. We have to go home. Come on now.”

He hurriedly pushed the bicycle along, but after a few steps he realized his brother wasn't following him. He looked back with the same haste.

Xu Zheng was standing in the same spot staring at his brother with a gaze so intent and still that Xu Ping felt his heart skip a beat.

"What's wrong, *Xiao*-Zheng?"

Xu Zheng stepped towards his brother and hugged the older boy before beginning to rub his head on his brother's shoulder like a dog trying to get its owner's attention.

Both a little annoyed and entertained, Xu Ping lifted his brother's face up. "What's wrong?"

Instead of answering, Xu Zheng took a few sniffs of his brother's shoulder and neck like a hound before burying his face again.

Xu Ping gave a few pushes, but the other boy would not budge.

"What is it? Something you want me to buy for you?"

Xu Zheng shook his head.

Xu Ping let the bicycle lean against him while he wrapped his arm around his brother.

"You know, *Xiao*-Zheng, you can tell me if you have any troubles." He rubbed his brother's back lovingly. "There's a lot I can't do, but if it's something I can do, I will make your wishes come true."

Xu Zheng muttered a quiet "okay."

"Did you get bullied at school?"

Xu Zheng shook his head.

"Did the teacher scold you?"

Xu Zheng shook his head again.

"Don't like him."

"Huh?" Xu Ping was confused. "Who?"

"He kept touching your shoulder! I don't like him! Don't like him!" As Xu Zheng said this, he kept nuzzling his brother's shoulder

as if he were trying to cover the scent of another dog who had invaded his territory.

It took Xu Ping a while before he recognized the situation. He pulled Xu Zheng up by the collar and chided, “You’re acting up ‘cause of that? You had me worried!”

He explained while pinching his brother’s cheeks, “That guy is my friend, and your brother isn’t a piece of antique art that can’t be touched.”

Xu Zheng continued his strong hug of his brother. He did not understand this bitter discontent inside him, and while Xu Ping did understand, the older boy could not say a thing.

Feeling a bit of bitterness but also sweetness, he patted his brother’s back lightly as he comforted, “All right now. You’re not a doggy, are you? Well, even if you are, I’m not your play bone.”

As expected, Xu Zheng could not grasp the metaphor. The boy only looked up briefly before embracing his brother tightly again.

He breathed in the fresh scent from his brother again and again, never tiring of it. The hand brushing along his spine brought this tingly feeling that slowly heated his body. Something vaguely familiar seemed to be racing and crashing around in his veins as though his flesh and bones themselves were declaring their desire for the person in his arms.

The bicycle toppled to the ground with a bang.

After a moment of silence, Xu Ping pushed Xu Zheng.

“Let go.”

Xu Zheng only tightened his arms.

“Are you disobeying me? I’m going to count to three. You’d better have let go before I do. One…two…”

Xu Zheng let go obediently and hung his head low like a child who had misbehaved.

Eyeing the tent in his brother’s pants, Xu Ping heaved a long, silent sigh.

He took off his own jacket and tied it around his brother's waist.

"Don't get horny in public," he reprimanded as he straightened the bicycle.

Xu Zheng was still standing dumbly in the same spot.

Xu Ping reached for his brother's hand but almost tripped and fell on his face.

"*Gege*, I feel bad."

Sighing, Xu Ping ruffled the younger boy's hair. "You've really grown up, all right."



His dad had bought the Phoenix[47] bicycle that Xu Ping used from a second-hand dealer. The black paint had mostly fallen off after all these years, the artificial leather on the saddle was so smooth from wear that it shone, and the bell on the handlebars had been replaced three times. Even the gold and red Phoenix logo had rusted and was not discernible under a coat of maroon grime.

He pushed the vehicle along the dimly lit road. Every few steps or so, the back wheel would make a *kuh-lunk* sound.

The chain seemed to have been knocked off, Xu Ping thought. It was too dark to examine closely.

What was supposed to be a walk had become an army march. When they passed by the Central Park, Xu Ping suggested to take a short break there.

The so-called Central Park was nothing more than a larger band of greenery and some trees and flowers sandwiched between two roads. A statue of a mother and son stood in the middle. Beside it was a set of children's slide, seesaw and swing. The park was not far from Xu Ping's house. Many parents took their children here in the summer evenings to stay cool, but now the moon had climbed quite high in the sky. Most people had long gone home. The dazzling

[47] A classic model from the Kung Sheung Cycle Company in Hong Kong.

nightlife in the following decades represented decadence and corruption in these years. The old ways of thinking – the pure, the conservative, the insane, the radical, the good and the bad – were still deeply-rooted and refusing to leave anytime soon, preparing for a final battle with the new wave.

Xu Ping parked the bicycle, sat down on one end of the seesaw and beckoned to his brother, asking him to play with him.

His brother weighed quite a bit more than him and had to sit closer to the centre to reach balance. Although he was long past the age to play on the seesaw, he still felt an indescribable joy when he was catapulted into the air. Xu Ping burst out in laughter.



The brothers continued fooling around in the park. Xu Ping was thoroughly entertained by the sight of his brother working the seesaw earnestly. From his end of the seesaw, the action of kicking off with two legs looked a lot like a leaping frog, albeit an extremely handsome frog. But Xu Ping decided to keep that thought to himself.

He hopped off the seesaw and found that the slide was too narrow for him. Thankfully, the seats of the swing were wide enough. There were four lined up in a row, so he pulled Xu Zheng over.

Holding onto the rope with both hands, he lightly pushed off on his toes to start swinging. He looked up at the tiny dots in the sky and thought of the summer nights when the family gathered together in the courtyard. He would lie hand in hand with his brother tracing the Milky Way across the navy blue sky. He was silent, in awe at the brilliant beauty of the universe.

He turned to Xu Zheng who was only sitting on the swing, not swinging.

He slowed his own swing.

There were no more automobiles on the roads now, only the occasional bicycle rolling past under the streetlight making the shadows sway apart before coming together again. The fence along

the sidewalk was crawling with ivy, and various spots of light were coming from the old residential building beyond it.

"*Xiao*-Zheng."

"Mhm?"

"I'm going to university."

Xu Zheng replied with a quiet hum, not having understood the meaning behind this.

"It's not right away, but if everything goes well, I'll leave home this September and move to the dorm at school."



Xu Zheng's head snapped to attention, and his eyes locked onto his brother.

"It will take four years. I might decide to further my studies after graduation. Master's, doctor's, it'll take another six or seven years. I think I'm a book-person, so my future career will probably be in this field."

Holding the ropes, Xu Zheng stayed quiet.

"I haven't discussed this with Dad yet, but I think he will support me, because everybody thinks going to school, being an academic is a noble thing."

Xu Zheng contemplated for a moment with his head down and replied, "Then I'll go with you, *Gege*."

After a long silence, Xu Ping began to explain, "You might not understand, *Xiao*-Zheng, but this world has its own rules. Some things everybody can do, some things nobody can do, and some things only some people can do. Going to university is one of those things."

Xu Zheng thought about it for a long time but in the end shook his head. "I don't get it."

Xu Ping chuckled. "It's fine if you don't. This world's a strange place, after all. There's a set of invisible rules fixed around every person. You can't see these rules, but they are very powerful. If they

are broken, other people will start attacking you. Sometimes I don't get it either."

Xu Zheng lowered his head and started stabbing the sand with the toe of his shoe.

"Is there something you'd like to do? Painting? Or singing? Anything?"

Xu Zheng picked at the ropes. "I want to be with you, *Gege*."

Feeling heavy-hearted, Xu Ping did not know how to answer. He asked after long minutes, "What would you want to do if you were by yourself?"

After some deep thought, Xu Zheng replied weakly, "I don't know. Where did you go, *Gege*?"

Xu Ping stared at the night sky for some time. "If I'm not with you one day, what would you do?"

"Go looking."

"What if I went somewhere far, far away, and you can't find me?"

Xu Zheng faltered before replying. "I go look for *Gege*."

"What if you couldn't find me no matter what?"

He stopped there.

Slowly, Xu Zheng bent over and clutched his head with both hands.

A car drove past, its glaring headlights scaring a bird perched on a tree. It let out a loud *gawk* as it flew away.

Xu Ping dusted his pants off as he stood up. "Never mind. Don't think about it. All meaningless questions anyway."

He grabbed his brother's hand. "Let's go home. It's late already. I still have some mock exams to do tonight."

But Xu Zheng did not stand up when his brother pulled him. He lifted his head up from between his hands and called, "*Gege*."

"Hm?" Xu Ping hummed with a smile.

Xu Zheng shot forth from the swing like a bomb crashing straight into Xu Ping. Caught completely off guard, Xu Ping was knocked back a few steps and fell backward. The two brothers tumbled to the ground.

Hurt from the fall, Xu Ping couldn't help punching his brother. "What the hell?!"

Xu Zheng only hugged his brother tightly without saying a word.



Twenty-three



"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great *is* that darkness!

–Matthew 6:19-23

Xu Ping had very nice writing style and even won first place in a pen calligraphy competition in junior high. The prize was a notepad, the inside cover of which bore a huge "PRIZE" stamp and a note from the head counsellor: Congratulations Xu Ping! May you continue to achieve greater heights!

Xu Ping later on ripped out every page of that notepad to teach Xu Zheng paper folding.

Xu Zheng was not slow at learning things that didn't require abstract thinking. Folding, pulling open, pressing flat, flipping over – the two brothers carried the armful of paper airplanes to the

balcony and sent them out into the warm, gentle afternoon breeze, watching them glide and swirl like dandelion fluff. Only the very first unsuccessful airplane was kept. Xu Ping wrote on its wing, "Xu Zheng, July 1985," and safe kept it in a box.

There were many more memorabilia inside that box.

It was a blue pastry box made of some kind of metal, a gift from a fan of their dad's. The precious imported item was covered in a flowery script of a foreign language. Each treat inside was wrapped in lily-white macramé lace. His dad had given it to his six-year-old brother without taking a single bite, but his brother in turn offered everything to him.



Xu Ping shut the lid tight and stuck the box into the cupboard.

The light was off in the room he shared with his brother. Xu Zheng was probably asleep.

He grabbed the doorknob, but after a moment of thought, he retracted his hand.

Xu Zheng was silent the entire way home. Xu Ping tried to talk many times, but it was as though his brother did not hear a word.

Normally, he would do homework at the table outside while his brother played with the radio in the bedroom. That night, Xu Zheng sat on the couch with the radio refusing to leave. At first, it was the inconsistent sound of the radio switching frequencies. Then it was the low voice of a male newscaster reporting the news before quickly seguing into a female opera singer's shrill voice singing "My Motherland."[48] Caught off guard, Xu Ping stabbed a hole in the paper with the tip of the pen. The ink blot was so big he could not wipe it clean.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, go play inside. I've got work."

Xu Zheng's head bobbed up once, but no response came.

[48] A patriotic song in the movie, *Battle on Shangganling Mountain*(1956).

The radio went silent. Xu Ping dug into his mock exam, ignoring the minor fit his brother was throwing.

The final question on the exam was a very complex algebraic proof. Xu Ping had had no luck going at it from several directions, and after filling three pages with brainstorming, he still had no idea. He was so frustrated he tore a few hairs from his head. He glanced at his watch to find it rather late, and he had not completed even a half of what he had planned to do. The frustration bugged him to no end, like caterpillars crawling all over.

He turned to his brother.

Radio parts were lying all over the coffee table and the couch. Screwdrivers, pliers, and red and yellow wires attached to the battery and circuit board. The speakers had been taken apart from the radio set. Xu Zheng paid no attention to the mess and was walking in circles around the couch.

"What's wrong?" Xu Ping frowned.

Xu Zheng kept his head down without answering.

Although his rational mind told him to ignore his brother and hurry with the mock exam, Xu Ping still stood up as though he suddenly developed OCD.

"What are you looking for? I'll help you."

One of the four screws securing the circuit board had fallen. Smaller than a pea and coated with black paint, it was nearly invisible against the cement floor. Lying on his stomach with his arm stretched underneath the couch, Xu Ping had to search inch by inch until he found it. He was covered in dust, and his knees were sore, but when he gave the nail to his brother he didn't receive a thank-you or a smile.

Taking the screw from Xu Ping's palm, an unhappy Xu Zheng sat back on the couch and continued his project with the radio.

Xu Ping paused with his brows furrowed wanting to say something, but in the end, he stopped himself.

Forty wasted minutes later, he still could not find the solution to the final question on the exam. He glanced at his watch. It was his brother's bedtime. The unproductive night left Xu Ping feeling rather defeated.

He threw the pen down and said in an exhausted tone to Xu Zheng, "Time to wash and get ready for bed."

If Xu Ping could say that his brother ignoring him earlier was his imagination, then now he could say for certain that Xu Zheng was working against him on purpose.



When undressing to take a shower, two buttons popped off because the younger boy was too rough with the shirt. Xu Ping saw and tried to help but was hit in the eye by the sudden lift of an elbow. More than once the boy had been told not to touch the hot water, but once Xu Ping looked away, he twisted the tap. The boy was fine, but Xu Ping got his arm burned from protecting his brother. Xu Ping bore the pain and washed his brother, but Xu Zheng kept knocking over the shampoo and soap as if he had hyperkinetic disorder.

By the third time he had to pick up the soap, Xu Ping was angry. "What the hell is it with you?!"

Xu Zheng looked down and did not speak. His damp hair clung to his head. His body might have become strong like a man's, but his face still carried child-like innocence.

Doing his best, Xu Ping managed to push his fury down.

He hurriedly clawed his brother's scalp knowing it would irritate his brother, but he only hoped to clean the boy and send him off to bed sooner.

A lot happened today. Intensive periods of writing mock exams, then reviewing them, then writing more exams. The talk with his homeroom teacher. Picking up his brother, and the talk with his brother's teacher. Running into Huang Fan who was head of the student movement. His brother getting jealous. The bicycle breaking.

Breaking the news about university to his brother, and his brother's difficulty accepting that fact. His brother throwing a fit…

By then, Xu Ping's physical stamina and mental patience were nearing depletion. What he wanted more than anything was to jump under the blankets and sleep like there was no tomorrow.

But clearly Xu Zheng did not plan to cooperate.

After the forceful shower, Xu Zheng's expression only became worse. Shutting the water, Xu Ping asked his brother to step out and dry off. Xu Zheng stayed in the tub, dripping wet. He pulled on his brother's shirt sleeve but looked in another direction. "Sleep with me, *Gege*."



Xu Ping faltered for a moment before casting his eyes down. "No."

"But you always did before."

Xu Ping replied coldly as he took the bath towel from the shelf and shook it out, "I won't anymore. You have to learn to sleep alone, and you have to learn to take your own showers. I won't always be with you, so you have to learn to take care of yourself."

Xu Zheng stayed silent with his head down, but the next moment, he shoved Xu Ping and ran out, still dripping wet.

Xu Ping fell back on his butt and only saw the watery footprints on the ground when he recovered.

When he chased after the boy with the towel and a change of clothes, he found his brother sitting with his legs splayed wide open on the couch, showing off his dick.

Xu Ping felt something snap.

"Close your legs! What do you think you're doing?!" Xu Ping barked at his brother.

Xu Zheng glared back.

Xu Ping did not back down. "What're you looking at? You think you're in the right?"

Xu Zheng whipped his head around so as to not see his brother.

Xu Ping tossed a pair of underwear to Xu Zheng. “What’re you doing naked? Put some pants on!”

Xu Zheng held the garment for a moment and then threw it on the ground.

Xu Ping froze as the fury boiled inside him.

“Pick it up.”

Xu Zheng tilted his head while looking at him. Xu Ping discovered for the first time that his mentally challenged brother could show such a defiant expression.

“Are you going to pick it up or not?”

Xu Zheng turned his head back around without a care.

Xu Ping scoffed out of anger.

“Xu Zheng, if you pick up the underwear and put it on now, I can pretend like nothing happened tonight. But if you don’t…”

Xu Ping trailed off.

Xu Zheng considered with his head to the side and then stood from the couch. Xu Ping thought the boy was going to grab the underwear and was about to breathe a sigh of relief when his brother put one foot on it. The boy flashed a challenging glare before jumping on it repeatedly.

“*Gege* is liar! Liar!”

“What did you say?!” Xu Ping was infuriated. “Say that again!”

Paying no heed, Xu Zheng kept shouting. “I don’t wear pants! You don’t like me wearing pants! You like my weenie! You touch it at night while I sleep! I know!”

As though struck by lightning, Xu Ping stood there, gaping.

Ever since he had the unspeakable dream, Xu Ping had moved out of their bedroom. But even so, he would still wake up with a fright in the middle of the night having dreamt a similar dream. Sharing a loving kiss with his brother, stripping each other naked and caressing each other’s bare skin – just that was sufficient to make him tremble with so much excitement in the dream that he

could shed tears of joy. He clearly understood that it was wrong and kept it at bay during the day, but at night it all spilled out. He would masturbate furiously while calling out his brother's name while the boy was asleep in the room. As long as he imagined that the hand around his penis belonged to his brother, he was able to achieve orgasm very quickly. During the day, he had to play the good brother who took care of his younger brother, but at night he lusted after his brother's body. Many times he made up his mind to stop this shameful behaviour, but time and time again he failed to do so.

"I let *Gege* touch my weenie. *Gege* sleep with me!" The boy who understood nothing of this world kept shouting.

Xu Ping was shaking all over while he cradled his head.

"Shut up."

"I like when *Gege* touch me."

"Shut up!"

"Sneaky *Gege* kissed me, too."

"Shut up! Shut up! I told you to shut up!"

He leapt over the couch to beat the boy, but his brother dodged it nimbly. When he lunged forward, the boy would back away. Every time he thought he had cornered Xu Zheng, the boy would always find a way to deftly slip out of his grasp.

Seething with anger, Xu Ping grabbed the glass ashtray from the television shelf and hurled it. Xu Zheng ducked, and the ashtray smashed into the wall. A fragment flew over his shoulder, leaving a long gash along his neck. His hand flew to the wound to find it wet with blood. He froze with shock.

Taking this opportunity, Xu Ping jumped on his brother, both of them falling to the ground, and planted a heavy punch while holding down his shoulder.

Xu Zheng's head flew to the side.

Xu Ping struck again.

"What do you know?! Nothing! You idiot! Idiot!"

Holding his own face, Xu Zheng turned his head around, his eyes full of hurt, fury and disbelief.

"I'm not!"

"You are! I hate you! I hate you as a brother!"

Xu Zheng stared at his brother for a silent second and then, letting out a roar, he kicked Xu Ping over. The naked boy straddled his brother and began pounding his face. Xu Ping raised his arms in defence but had his arms pushed aside. The younger boy was extremely strong. He restrained Xu Ping's wrists with one hand, and Xu Ping could not break free. A fist repeatedly smashed into Xu Ping's face, and his teeth seemed to come loose.

The crazed boy only was bent on venting his fury and hurt and kept throwing punches with all his strength. It was all a big lie – *Gege* whom he relied on and adored, *Gege* who promised he would always be with him, the only existence in his life, the most precious light in his world. He might not have known what the "university" that his brother spoke of was, but he knew his brother was going to abandon him for it. Xu Zheng felt a pain in his chest that he could not bear. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. It felt like a part of him had been carved out, but when he checked everything was still in place.

His hands, his legs, none of them were his anymore. He beat the boy underneath him as though he were possessed. Only when blood came spewing out of Xu Ping's mouth did he come to a halt, his illusion dissipating.

The glass lens on Xu Ping's eyeglasses was cracked, and his eyes were swollen. He lay there for some time before weakly reaching a finger into his mouth, checking each of his molars.

Wiping away the blood around his mouth, he spoke quietly with a lisp. "Thankfully the teeth are intact. I just bit my tongue."

He panted for a while longer before lightly nudging his brother who was still sitting on him. "Get off."

Dumbly, Xu Zheng stood up.

“Put on your clothes.”

Xu Zheng picked up the underwear and clumsily pulled it up his legs.

When he returned, Xu Ping was attempting to stand.

Xu Ping felt a whirling sensation.

It’d better not be a concussion, he prayed.

He evaded the hand stuck out to help him. He grabbed on to the table leg and stood up, took two steps and felt sick to his stomach.

Standing helplessly to the side, Xu Zheng appeared surprised, pained and afraid.

“*Gege*.”

Xu Ping did not respond.

“*Gege*.”

Xu Ping sat resting in a chair for some time. Then he suddenly started laughing towards the ceiling. The action pulled at the injury in his mouth turning the laugh into pained hisses as he inhaled.

Xu Zheng might have been the most stupid person in the world, but even he knew he did something terrible.

Xu Ping scoffed, “You should be happy that you won a fight. Why the puckered face?”

He flipped over a glass on the table and poured himself some water to wash away the rusty iron taste.

“*Gege*.”

Xu Ping wanted to stand up, but his legs were soft like noodles.

“*Gege*.”

The wall clock rang twelve times. Xu Ping realized that the day in fact had only just ended.

“*Gege*.”

“Shut the hell up!” Xu Ping snapped as he slapped the table.

Xu Zheng hung his head low and dared not make another sound.

Xu Ping said to himself.

Don't be like this. He's just a dummy. No need to get angry with him! You should be happy! Look how well you've taught him! All these years, all the efforts you spent on him, telling him not to take a beating, wasn't it all for this? He's grown up now, and he can protect himself without you beside him.

He sprawled onto the table with his face in his arms.

I'm not sad. He thought. *I'm just tired. So tired. It's been too long of a day today. I think I need a rest.*



Twenty-four



"That which has been *is* what will be,
That which *is* done is what will be done,
And *there is* nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which it may be said,
"See, this *is* new"?
It has already been in ancient times before us.
There is no remembrance of former *things*,
Nor will there be any remembrance of *things* that are to come
By *those* who will come after.

–Ecclesiastes 1:9-11

Xu Ping thought he would lie in bed wide awake until the sun rose, but he fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

He did not dream. Like a robot out of energy, he lay on the bed with hands crossed over his stomach and did not move a muscle during the night.

When he awoke, he heard the sound of the street cleaning machine whirring by.

May was coming to an end.

Sunrise came earlier and earlier, and the temperature was also increasing. The moist spring had slowly disappeared like the

sparrows fluttering among the trees while the young summer sun grew with intensity in the crisp southeastern wind.

There was always a lot to do on the weekend between the seasons. The long sleeves needed to be stored while the short sleeves needed to be brought out. The thick winter blankets needed to be taken apart and washed. The bamboo sheets and sandals needed to be taken out to the balcony to drive out the dampness that had collected during winter.

He stared at the old yet unfamiliar crack on the ceiling. Only after blinking a few times did he remember he had long ago moved into his dad's room.

The sunlight shot in between the curtains. Regardless of what he wanted, a brand new day had begun.

Xu Ping slowly sat up in bed and instinctively reached out to the bedside table for his glasses. There was nothing there waiting for him. His brother had broken them yesterday.

Retracting his hand, he sat silent for a while before taking the clothes from the back of the chair and dressing himself. The door to his brother's bedroom was still closed.

He walked into the bathroom, squeezed out some toothpaste, opened the tap and filled a cup with water. Then he began to brush his teeth.

In the mirror above the sink was a person with sickly white skin, a small pointed chin and bright eyes. Perhaps because of genetics, Xu Ping's skin was very fair and did not suffer from pimples even when he pulled all nighters.

His neck was unusually slender for a man, and his jaw line from the side was elegant beyond description. Although he was not breathtakingly handsome like his dad or brother, there was a certain graceful purity that made him seem out of place in this mortal world.

Xu Ping spat out the foam and cupped some water to splash his face. It still hurt where his brother hit him yesterday. At the corner

of his left eye was a bluish bump. The cut on his lips had not healed and was a deep purple today.

He gently dabbed his face with a towel and then looked into the mirror at himself. He froze for a moment before quickly looking away as though disgusted.

Eyes downcast, he pulled open the bathroom door and stepped out, bumping straight into a warm body.

For some reason his brother was naked standing outside the bathroom.



Xu Ping hurriedly took a few steps back.

Neither of them spoke.

Then Xu Ping broke the silence chuckling, “All right, hurry up and wash up. I'm going to make breakfast.”

Eyes pointed down, he nudged his brother aside and slipped away.

The breakfast menu today was rice porridge and other appetizers. A pot of golden yellow porridge stood beside a few small plates of cucumber, bamboo shoots and wheat gluten balls.

Xu Zheng had a big appetite and normally could eat every last morsel, but this morning he only stirred his bowl of porridge with the spoon, seemingly not hungry.

Xu Ping kept his eyes down at his food and finished breakfast before his brother for once. He stood up and gathered his dishes. “Take your time. I have something to do.”

He was passing by Xu Zheng when the boy caught his wrist.

Xu Ping pulled his hand free asking, “What?”

“You take me to run in the morning, *Gege*.”

Xu Ping pursed his lips. “Sorry. I forgot.”

He actually forgot. Somehow he had forgotten the long-observed routine.

Xu Zheng made to grab him again, but he stepped back and spoke flatly facing the kitchen, “Could we skip today? I’ve lots to do.”

With that he started towards the kitchen with his dishes in hand, but his brother shot forward and hugged him around the waist.

CRASH. The dishes shattered on the floor.

Both of them froze, shocked.

Xu Ping tore away from his brother’s grip and squatted down to pick up the broken porcelain, muttering, “Look at what you’ve done! Now the dishes are broken. Don’t run up to me and hug me like that again. Go drink your congee. We’re not going running today.”



Xu Zheng didn’t speak.

He knew very well that the younger boy was staring at him fixedly, but Xu Ping didn’t want to turn around.

He heard his brother sitting back on his seat and picking up the spoon.

He had to live on even if it was painful. The person behind him was his brother with whom he was connected by an invisible bond of blood. With that in mind, he felt the air in the living room thinning and scurried off to the kitchen with the broken pieces of porcelain.

The morning slipped by along with the tick tock of the swing clock.

Xu Ping locked himself in the room and completed two mock exams, effortlessly solving the question that had challenged him last night. The more troubled he was emotionally, the better he could focus, as though he were channeling all the unspeakable feelings out, as ink, through the tip of his pen.

His brother did not knock on his door. He breathed a sigh of relief, but at the same time his chest felt congested as if he had an asthma attack and could not get enough oxygen no matter how much air he was breathing through his gaping mouth.

Lunch was eaten in silence.

His brother sat across from Xu Ping in a white T-shirt, clumsily pushing rice into his mouth. Neither had lessons because it was the weekend, and so the day seemed to last even longer.

Some noises came in through the open window. One of the units had purchased a new refrigerator, and its tenants were hollering at the workers to carefully move the machine upstairs.

Xu Ping was leisurely washing dishes in the kitchen while his brother was sitting on the couch watching the noontime *Animal World*.[49]



The topic of today's show was the reproduction of lions.

"The lioness goes into heat only once every two years, and the male lion follows her like a shadow. Each session of intercourse lasts only a few minutes, but the number of sessions each day can easily exceed fifty…"

After cleaning his hands, Xu Ping took off the apron and hung it on the kitchen door.

Eyes pointed down, he straightened his sleeves while saying to his brother, "I'm going out for a bit."

Xu Zheng's head turned around and he asked slowly, "Where are you going, *Gege*?"

"A friend's house to get some study materials."

Xu Zheng stood up from the couch.

"I'll go by myself. You don't need to come."

Xu Zheng paused and considered for a moment before letting his head droop. "Oh."

Xu Ping pursed his lips but still reminded, "You stay home, all right? I'm taking the keys with me, so don't open the door if someone knocks. I'll deal with whatever it is when I come home."

Xu Zheng showed his acknowledgement.

[49] A nature show on CCTV.

The expression on the boy's face, like that of a dog abandoned by its owner, gave Xu Ping a pang. He quickly whipped his head around.

The river bank was lined with lots of weeping willows whose baby green leaves were swaying in the breeze.

The bicycle was broken. When he headed out, he noticed the chain on the back wheel had fallen off, so he had to walk to get anywhere.

Xu Ping stood on the rocky bank, the breeze sweeping across the river to rustle his hair and create golden ripples in the green water.



Behind him was a young mother pushing a stroller along the path, a couple snuggled together chatting on the bench, and a student from a nearby university rushing off with a backpack slung across his shoulder.

Xu Ping picked up a flat pebble and flung it. The stone skimmed the water three times before plopping into the water.

"Young comrade, could you take a photo for us?"

Xu Ping nodded and took the camera.

It was a family of three who had come out on an adventure on account of the good weather. The young boy had his arms around his mother's neck as she carried him in her arms.

"Ready, one, two, three!"

When he reached three, the young couple began smiling on cue, but the two-year-old started causing a ruckus for some reason.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling okay?" the mother cooed.

"Bingtanghulu!"[50] the child screamed.

"Yes, yes, yes. I'll buy you one in a bit," the mother promised.

[50] A treat commonly on the streets of Northern cities. It is made of hawthorn fruits coated with hardened sugar syrup.

“No you won’t! You’re always doting on him! He can’t even take a walk without being carried. He sees something he wants to eat and starts crying right away. What’s gonna happen if this becomes a habit, huh?!”

“Oh, get outta here! You just don’t wanna spend that extra money! He’s a baby still! So what if he eats a bingtanghulu? I’ll buy it if you’re too petty to spend the money for your son!” The woman who was kind and gentle to her son suddenly turned and began scolding her husband.

“What do you know?! What do you mean I don’t wanna spend the money?! I just wanna set a good example for him! His mom only knows to spoil him, and we all know nothing comes out well from over-spoiling your kid! Do you understand?”

Just as the argument reached its peak, the son suddenly let out a piercing cry, and the two quickly turned to him and started to soothe him.

This trivial conversation completely filled Xu Ping with a sense of loneliness. He passed the camera back and continued slowly along the bank.

Telling his brother that he needed to retrieve some materials was an excuse for him to leave the house. It was as though a whirlpool formed wherever Xu Zheng was. It sucked away all of his emotions and energy, but the more he fought, the quicker he sunk. Gradually, it felt as if the space around him and the oxygen he breathed were being taken from him. But to whom in this world could he tell his pain?

He stood on the road, looking all around him, and found that he had nowhere to turn.

Twenty-five



"*The fly is thy brother. Do it no harm. The wild birds that roam through the forest have their freedom. Snare them not for thy pleasure. God made the blind-worm and the mole, and each has its place. Who art thou to bring pain into God's world?*

–Oscar Wilde, *The Star-child*

The red traffic light turned green. Huang Fan stepped on the pedal and zipped through the intersection among the flow of bicycles. After turning right onto a small road in front of the University of X's back entrance, the number of bicycles on the road decreased substantially. The white flowers of the pagoda tree on either side of the street were on the verge of withering, and when the wind blew the petals swirled around in the air like snowflakes.

But Huang Fan was not in the mood to appreciate this.

Residential houses lined the road. Laundry and some plants could be seen from the fifth-floor deck.

He turned at a certain metal gate.

After parking his bicycle, he grabbed his backpack from the basket and ran up the stairs, taking multiple steps at once. Soon, the hand stopped rummaging in his pockets for the keys.

There was someone sitting in front of Room 302. Short, luscious, black hair. White shirt, black pants. Head buried between his knees, showing his slender, pale neck, it was like a crane landing in the yard on a snowy night.

Huang Fan held his breath for some time and then called softly, “Xu Ping?”

Xu Ping’s fingers twitched, and he slowly raised his head from his knees.

Seeing the younger man’s face, Huang Fan’s eyes narrowed, but he stopped himself, only smiling. “What a surprise. Why did you come all of a sudden?”



Xu Ping pushed on his knees and stood up, dusting off his pants. “Sorry, I didn’t even give you a heads up. I just wanted to grab the study materials from you, and I didn’t have anything to do on Saturday, so…”

Huang Fan fished out his keys to open the door. “You really should’ve told me beforehand. What if I came back really late? Then you would’ve come for nothing. You didn’t wait for long, did you?”

Xu Ping faced away. “Not long. I was just in the neighbourhood and thought I’d give it a shot. If you weren’t here, I’d have left.”

Huang Fan eyed the tiny white petals on Xu Ping’s shoulders, but he didn’t want to expose the lie.

The unit had one living room and two bedrooms and was very tidy. On the coffee table were many books on quantum mechanics and advanced calculus and a very thick English-Chinese dictionary.

Huang Fan closed the door behind Xu Ping and took off his dark jacket. “You picked a bad time to come. My roommate just so happens to have gone back home and wasn’t here the entire day today. Otherwise, he could’ve let you in.”

Xu Ping smiled a little stiffly.

Huang Fan gestured at the couch. “Sit. Anything to drink?”

Xu Ping shook his head. “No, thanks. You must be busy. I’ll get the materials and go.”

Huang Fan faltered for a moment. “We can’t have that. I’ve been looking forward for your visit this whole time.” He went in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “How’s beer?”

Xu Ping didn’t want to be picky since this wasn’t his house, so he nodded. “Sure.”

Grabbing two bottles of Tsingtao, Huang Fan easily uncapped the bottles and placed one in front of Xu Ping.

Xu Ping said thanks.

The dark green glass was icy to the touch. Holding the bottle, Xu Ping hesitated before taking a sip.

It was cold and bitter, and the smell of alcohol shot up his nostrils.

He couldn’t hold back a cough.

Huang Fan chuckled. “What, don’t tell me it’s your first time drinking beer?”

A little embarrassed, Xu Ping chuckled and nodded meekly.

Huang Fan stared steadily at the younger man from another couch on the side. “Nobody’s used to the taste at first, but you’ll learn to enjoy it after a few more sips. Some days when I get home and I’m stressed or tired, I just need a nice bottle of beer.”

Since it was a kind offer, Xu Ping could only oblige. The golden liquid slid down his throat, and if he ignored the bitterness, he did find a certain refreshing taste. He had sat outside the door for some time and indeed was thirsty. Before he knew it, he had finished the bottle.

Huang Fan pushed his own bottle towards Xu Ping.

Xu Ping felt self-conscious. “No, thanks. One’s enough.”

“No worries.” Huang Fan flashed a smile. “I don’t have much here, but I never get low on beer.”

He then slapped his own thigh and stood up. “Hang on a second.”

Xu Ping assumed he was going to fetch the study materials, so he nodded. Then he sunk into the comfy couch cushion, feeling his body relax. The room was very quiet. Outside the window, the gentle sunset shone on the green trees, and a tree sparrow was hopping on the balcony pecking at its food. He turned to the table and flipped through the books on the coffee table. Turning over the cover of *Quantum Physics*, he found the dedication page: I dedicate this book to my dear wife, Kathleen, for thirty beautiful years of my life.



"I could lend it to you if you're interested."

Xu Ping turned around. "No, it's fine. I wouldn't understand it anyway. Just looking around."

Huang Fan put the stack of study materials down and took a seat beside Xu Ping. "You can skip the demonstration and proof. That part's too complicated, but the part about quantum cosmology is interesting, though. Have you heard of Schrödinger's cat?"

Xu Ping shook his head.

"Hypothetically speaking, you place a cat into a box with a poison-releasing contraption. In the box, there's also a radioactive atom, and this atom has a fifty percent chance of decaying within one hour, thereby activating the poison contraption and killing the cat. When you open the box after one hour, there will be two possibilities: one, an atom that has undergone decay and a dead cat, and two, an atom that hasn't undergone decay and a live cat."

"That's right," Xu Ping said after some quick thought.

"The question is, then, what is the cat's condition before you inspect it? According to quantum theory, the cat is neither dead nor alive before you open the box, but a state of overlap."

Xu Ping considered it for a while. "I don't really understand. What does a state of overlap mean?"

“It is indeed a little hard to grasp at first,” Huang Fan chuckled. “Because quantum theory discusses the world from a micro perspective. When the mass and qualities of matter become very, very small, to the extent of the sub-atomic particles, the movement pattern becomes vastly different. But I like one explanation in particular. Let’s say the box held not the cat but your fate. Before opening the box, you exist and you don’t exist simultaneously. The moment the box is opened, the world splits into numerous worlds, and you exist in the space according to your choices. And there are many more you’s living in parallel worlds because they chose differently.”



Xu Ping processed this for a moment. “So according to what you said, I am here in your house, and there are many more me’s, maybe lying on the road dying, or at home doing homework, or playing ball?”

“You could say that,” Xu Ping smiled.

“I still don’t really get it,” Xu Ping admitted after more thought. “But it’s an interesting way to look at things.”

“Fascinating, isn’t it? The ultimate stages of physics research turn into religion or something. Even a top scholar like Newton turned to God in his old age. But if you think about it another way, his life-long research was probably the will of God.”

“Are you in the faculty of physics?”

“No, I’m in maths. We place more importance on the rigorous process of mathematical proof, not the philosophical meanings of the results. But a lot of things have happened lately, and these books made me think a lot.”

Xu Ping asked in a soft voice, “How’s the student movement now?”

“It’s still going, but we face more and more challenges.” Huang Fan paused. “The hunger strike did not bring about our desired

results, so now we're holding meetings and discussing what to do next. Some student leaders brought up the idea of self-immolation."

Xu Ping was a little tipsy and took a few seconds before fully comprehending. "Self-immolation?"

"Yeah, they want to use their flesh and blood to awaken the people's conscience."

"No!" Xu Ping exclaimed after a long silence. "That's not right!"

Huang Fan fell silent for a long time staring at the other man before nodding. "I don't agree either, so I voted against it at the meeting. If they insist on the idea, I will take my people and leave."



Xu Ping nodded. "It's better to stay alive. No matter what, staying alive is better."

"Yeah, if only they thought about it with a shred of rational sense, they would agree to that truth, but when you're standing at the head of the crowd, and one word from you brings back the echo of hundreds, thousands of people, you start having this illusion of invincibility. It becomes hard to control yourself then."

"Do you feel that, too?"

"I do. But I'm calmer than they are. Because I have more I'm after."

Xu Ping looked up. "What?"

Huang Fan thought about it before answering. "If I had to say, it'd probably be freedom."

Xu Ping scoffed. "Why, you don't think you're free?"

Huang Fan smiled. "Not that kind of freedom."

Xu Ping didn't hold back and kept laughing. "Then what kind of freedom?"

Huang Fan kept his gaze on the other man and enunciated, "The kind of freedom where I can walk alongside the person I love in broad day light without people pointing and whispering."

Twenty-six

"*Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.*

–Oscar Wilde



Upon hearing this, Xu Ping froze before starting to shudder involuntarily.

The feeling of suffocation seemed to have come back again.

His head was spinning. Maybe it was the alcohol finally hitting him.

He put his hand on the stack of study materials and breathed, "Sorry, it's getting late. I'm going to go."

He made to take the books but was stopped by a hand.

"What're you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Is it me?"

"I'm not afraid of anybody."

Huang Fan laughed. "I thought you'd already guessed. Out of all the people I know from high school you're the only one who still calls me President Huang."

"...no, it's not what you think."

"Xu Ping." Huang Fan kept his eyes on him. "You and I are the same."

After a pause, Xu Ping repeated, “Sorry, I really have to go.”

He hurriedly stood up, but Huang Fan grabbed him, making him fall back on the couch. The older man locked his hands above his head and hovered over him.

Xu Ping was so shocked and angry he was shaking.

“Let go!”

“Tell me who hit you.”

“Nobody hit me.”

Huang Fan stared at his face, scoffing. “Liar.”

Xu Ping struggled against the other man. “I fell down the stairs!”

Huang Fan continued looking down at Xu Ping for a moment before touching his face. “It must hurt. Do you love him so much that you won’t even resist when he beats you?”

Xu Ping shook his head furiously. “Go to hell! Let go of me!”

“No wonder you’re so depressed. Does he know your feelings?”

“Shut up!”

“So he hasn’t realized. And you’re too scared to tell him, aren’t you? Since you’re both men.”

“Shut your mouth!”

“How much do you love him? Do you love him so much you touch yourself at night calling his name? So much that you shudder when you get close to him? So much that you wake up from a wet dream about him, your legs and pants covered with cum?”

Xu Ping kicked at Huang Fan but he only held the leg down.

“You lost so much weight partly because of the exam but also because you’ve realized you have fallen desperately in love, right? You want to run but you can’t. You’re in so much pain but have no one to turn to. How would they look at you if they knew? That the smart, proper student, Xu Ping, was a disgusting homosexual? You’re too scared to tell your parents, too scared to tell your friends. You find yourself alone in this world with nowhere to go except here, because you know only I can understand your pain, only I can

comfort your soul. How long did you wait for me outside? Two hours? Three? Or maybe four? Poor Xu Ping. You're so heartbroken, yet you put on an act as if you're all right. You're on the verge of breaking down yet you don't have the courage to tell anyone your secret."

Xu Ping clenched his teeth.

"You fear me, don't you? Because looking at me is like looking at yourself, dirty and disgusting. That's why sly little you always kept your distance no matter how I tried to get to know you. You keep running away whenever someone forces you to face the problem. You must be getting desperate to be coming to me on your own accord. You have no other way out, so you'd even drink a poison like me. Isn't that right?"



Then Huang Fan burst out in guffaws as though he thought of something funny.

While holding down Xu Ping, he began unbuttoning his own shirt at a leisurely pace. "I spent the entire day speaking with a bunch of idiots and crazies. I'm starting to doubt that these guys actually have brains, thinking they could conquer the world with a couple thousand students?! The direness of the situation is painfully obvious, but they still think the revolution is near its victory and won't leave the square no matter what. Their hearts are empty and weak, not even knowing what they are chasing after. The crowd cheers, and they explode with bloody passion; they parade the flag of democracy while not even knowing what democracy is. Or they're just daydreamers who dare to have a vision but hold none of the abilities to make those visions come true. Once they run into trouble, I'm called onto the scene to wipe their asses. I've had it with these so-called team members!"

He took off his shirt, revealing the lean and powerful torso underneath. "Then, as if I hadn't had enough today, you show up. I spent the whole day dealing with those sons of bitches at the square

and just wanted to come home, take a nice shower and relax. But no, you come to my door crying like a little bitch. I'm not the one you like, but you still come here looking for comfort after getting beat up, and like always you try to run away when we hit the crux of the issue. What the hell makes you think I'm a damn doormat for you to walk on whenever you want?!"

Then he stopped speaking and leaned down towards Xu Ping until his breath was warm against the younger man's face. For a split second, his eyes were gentle.

"That guy doesn't understand your pain at all, not one bit. It makes me furious to think that something I had liked for so long was treated so roughly by someone else."

He grabbed Xu Ping by the hair and forced a kiss.

Startled, Xu Ping fought back.

"Shit! You actually bit me!" Huang Fan wiped away the blood from his lips and sat up, leaving Xu Ping.

He sat on the couch by Xu Ping's feet and slipped out a box of cigarettes. He slid one out, lit it with a click of the lighter and breathed out a cloud of white smoke.

Xu Ping sat up panting wildly, face full of shock.

"All right, you leave now. I can't help you with your problem."

Xu Ping didn't reply.

"If you don't leave now, there are no guarantees I won't rape you."

Xu Ping sat there for a while, pondering, before saying, "I'm sorry."

Huang Fan paused with his cigarette and asked, "What? Is that pity?"

"No, not pity. I just think we're alike."

Huang Fan scoffed, "I'm not a candy-ass who can't say shit to the person I love!"

After some silence, Xu Ping nodded. “You’re right. I’ll probably never express my feelings for him because the one I love is none other than my blood brother, Xu Zheng.”

With that said, he headed for the door without checking for Huang Fan’s reaction. His darkest, most hideous secret of his eighteen years of life, the thorn imbedded in his flesh, had been exposed so casually.

Why would he love his brother? What hatred must destiny have harboured to curse him with this twisted and perverse romance? Xu Ping couldn’t find the answers. Sometimes when he looked into the mirror, he even had the unbearable thought that he was not human, for underneath that average face was a frightening beast, lurking quietly.



His hand had just touched the doorknob when the man behind him grabbed his arm. Then he was spun around, and he struggled against the grip for a moment and only a moment.

Wiping the tears from Xu Ping’s face, Huang Fan sighed. “You really won’t let me off that easily, eh.”

This time Xu Ping did not fight back when he was kissed. Perhaps it was because his shady secrets had been exposed to this man that he could feel this carefree.

“Have you done it before with anybody?” Huang Fan asked as he carried Xu Ping back to the couch.

Xu Ping shook his head.

Huang Fan smiled delightedly.

“Oh yeah?” he said. “Then let me be your brother, Xu Ping.”

The sky was completely dark now. Rain began falling, exploding with plops when it hit the glass.

The curtains in the living room were not drawn, but the clouds hid the moon, and the room was so dark nothing could be discerned.

Feeling chilly, Xu Ping had to fight hard not to shiver.

Huang Fan poured out half a glass of baijiu in the kitchen and brought it to Xu Ping. “Drink.”

Xu Ping thought it was water and took a big gulp. The stinging smell rushed up his nose and into his skull, and he began coughing.

“What is that?”

Huang Fan only chuckled.

He took a bit into his mouth and grabbed the back of Xu Ping’s head for another forceful kiss.

Xu Ping felt the liquor dripping down along his neck and then a flaming hot muscle stirring his mouth.

He had never experienced such a strange sensation, as if he were being violated from the inside. While his protests came out as muffled noises, his hands pushed the other man.

But they were quickly caught by Huang Fan, who put them behind his neck. “Hold onto me.”

Everything smelled like alcohol. His hair. His skin. Xu Ping felt as though his brain were fried by the smell, and his nose was about to break down.

His white shirt was ripped open, the buttons clinking after they sprang away.

He wanted to say no, but there was another tongue in his mouth blocking the way.

Every part of him was being touched. The other man was sucking his neck while roughly playing with his chest as he would that of a woman. He was met with an unusual tingle that shot up his spine when his nipples were touched, and he couldn’t hold back a yelp.

Taking notice of this, Huang Fan ducked down and began licking, flicking a nipple with his tongue.

Xu Ping clenched his teeth while his chest rose and fell violently.

His belt was undone. His pants were torn off.

The man's hand was on his penis which was only slightly engorged, not yet hard.

Huang Fan held the younger man in his arms, licking his ear while stroking his penis.

Eyes tightly shut, Xu Ping stayed soundless.

Fingers drew circles on the head of his member. Hands were wrapped around his penis, kneading. He was erect but his erection was soft and limp.

Huang Fan was licking his neck when he suddenly whispered in his ear, "*Gege*."



Xu Ping shuddered as though electricity ran through him. His member instantly filled with blood, hardening into a rod.

In the house where nothing could be discerned; even the scents were muddied by alcohol. The person behind him was tall and his embrace warm. He was calling him *gege*. He was licking his earlobe. Who is this? Who is this?

I love you, *Gege*.

Don't leave me, *Gege*.

I love *Gege*, but *Gege* doesn't love me.

We have to be together forever, *Gege*.

Gege. *Gege*.

Oh, it must be *Xiao*-Zheng.

So it's *Xiao*-Zheng.

His eyes closed, Xu Ping reached behind himself to cup his brother's face.

Don't be afraid, *Xiao*-Zheng, I will always protect you. *Gege* will never leave you.

His underwear was peeled off. His legs were spread open.

It was embarrassing to be facing the door with his legs splayed wide open, but as long as it was what his brother wanted, he was fine with it.

Even if his nipples were painfully twisted or his member roughly treated, he would still shake uncontrollably at even the lightest breath down his neck from his brother.

He rested his head back on the shoulder behind him and reached with both hands to hug his neck.

Feeling his brother's erection poking at his waist, he couldn't help but touch it, but he was stopped.

Then he was flipped over like a fish in a pan to land face down on the couch with his butt high in the air.

Both his hands were being held down while relentless kisses trailed down his spine.

His cheeks were spread apart. Xu Ping shuddered from the pain when one finger entered him. The foreign invasion made him struggle, as though his body knew, despite the amount of alcohol flowing through him, that he would fall victim to immense pain if he were not to fight back now.

"*Gege*."

Hearing the gentle beckon, he eventually stopped writhing.

The finger slid in and out of him. Soon, one became two.

It took Xu Ping a very long time before he realized why his brother had to play with that filthy place. He pressed his face against the couch and bore with it in silence.

It didn't feel good at all, but if it was what his brother wanted, it didn't matter if he was going to bleed or be broken.

The thought of his brother entering him made him shake with fear but also want to cry from excitement.

There was a voice in his head constantly reminding him that something was wrong, but he purposely ignored it. He didn't want to think about anything just this once. Just once was good enough. Then he would abandon all these feelings to become a good son, a good brother.

He raised his head and urged the person behind him with closed eyes, “Hurry.”

He heard a quiet laugh from behind.

Silently, he repeated his brother’s name.

Xiao-Zheng. *Xiao*-Zheng. *Xiao*-Zheng.

He was ready.

Then – *CLICK!* – the lights came on in the living room as though it had woken up from its dream.

He heard a young man’s slightly accented voice say as luggage was tossed onto the ground, “What the hell. You left the door unlocked…”

It was the roommate.



Twenty-seven



"*No, I am not a child anymore; I have grown and matured through the adversity. But why do I yearn for the loving hands of my mom or any one of my family, or even of someone I know. Please come close to me in this lonely hour, please hold my hand tight and give to me love and power so I may overcome this arduous journey.*

–Đặng Thùy Trâm, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*

Xu Ping's hands would not stop trembling.

Only the top two buttons remained intact on his shirt, but he couldn't even get those small, white plastic pieces in place.

The door to the bedroom opened and closed. Huang Fan walked over while slipping into a T-shirt.

"It's okay. My roommate is in his own room now. You had your face in the couch. He shouldn't have seen it."

Xu Ping merely continued his attempt at the buttons with shaking hands as though he had not heard.

Huang Fan lit a cigarette and took a few puffs before rummaging through his closet and tossing a sweater to Xu Ping. "That shirt of yours is no good. Use mine for now."

The white sweater fell on the younger man's lap but soon slipped onto the floor.

Watching this, Huang Fan stubbed out the smoke and approached Xu Ping. “I’ll help you.”

Before he even got close enough to touch Xu Ping, the latter hissed loudly, “Don’t touch me!”

Huang Fan’s hand stayed frozen in midair for some time before dropping to his side and forming a tight fist, but his face showed none of it. He chuckled, “Why are you so scared? I’m not in the mood anymore even if you want to do it now.”

Xu Ping had finally conquered the first button and moved his shivering hands to the second one.

Huang Fan picked up the sweater from the ground, dusted it off and held it up before Xu Ping. “Wear this. The buttons on your shirt all broke off, and the fabric is thin. You’re going to catch a cold in the rain.”

Xu Ping kept his head down in silence.

Huang Fan slid his hands into the sweater from the bottom and stretched it out for Xu Ping. “Come on. Head first.”

Xu Ping slapped the garment to the floor.

He glared at the other man with something akin to hatred before slowly moving his gaze away. “I was wrong. I should’ve never come here.”

Huang Fan paused and then let his head fall back as he guffawed.

Then suddenly he grabbed Xu Ping by the collar and threw him against the wall. “Say that again, you motherfucker!”

Xu Ping looked up at him and enunciated clearly, “I should’ve never –”

But he didn’t get to finish because Huang Fan grabbed his neck.

Xu Ping’s neck was the most beautiful, most delicate part of his body. Sometimes Huang Fan could get lost just looking at a small tilt of Xu Ping’s head.

When he was on the student council, he did all he could to keep Xu Ping close to him. He organized numerous events every single term, not to promote extracurricular activities for all the students, but to spend as much time as he could with this boy. Their classrooms were on different floors, but he would take the long route for no reason and would look in, searching for his figure seemingly unintentionally. Sometimes the boy would be reading, or chatting with classmates, or lying on his desk snoozing, showing off a section of his fair neck. A trivial scene like that could keep him reminiscing all day long.

He quickly let go.

Xu Ping slumped to the floor, coughing violently.

After a very long time, he finally caught his breath. He spoke, hand on his neck. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Huang Fan clenched his teeth.

Xu Ping picked up his pants and put them on.

The other buttons on his shirt had completely come loose from the earlier episode, and he couldn’t cover himself fully even if he used both his hands to hold the shirt close.

“I’m sorry,” Huang Fan said in an undertone.

Xu Ping announced softly, “I have to go home. It’s late. My brother must be worried sick.”

Huang Fan grabbed him. “Forget your brother. You and him have no future. What can he do for you? All he will do is drag you down! He doesn’t even have the ability to survive in this world; he’s just an idiot! It’s the same as you loving a dog! Be with me, Xu Ping! We share the same interests and passions. I love you, and I am capable of taking care of you. Being gay is still taboo, but you will be ten times less stressed than now!”

Xu Ping peeled his hand off and replied calmly, “Thank you, Huang Fan. But if it weren’t for Xu Zheng, I wouldn’t even be gay.”

That night, the rain didn't stop until the wee hours of the morning.

Huang Fan parted the curtains and watched the downpour hit the street lit by dim yellow lights. Other than the rings of light, everything else was black. This gave him the illusion that the water was falling not from the sky but from the streetlights themselves.

Xu Ping had left.

He had seen Xu Ping off to the lobby. The rain was going strong, and the raindrops bounced so high off the ground that his pant legs were wet.

He passed his umbrella to Xu Ping, but the younger man did not take it.

"Take it! Look at this rain! Do you *want* a cold?"

With his hands holding his shirt together, Xu Ping replied flatly, "You don't understand. I don't want to borrow anything from you. Borrowing it means I'd have to return it, and then we would have to meet again. What's the point?"

Huang Fan paused, his hand nearly cracking the shaft of the umbrella. He smiled, "Are you worried my roommate will blab about what happened today? Rest assured, I have my ways of shutting him up. You won't be involved."

He grabbed Xu Ping's hand, flattened the palm, placed the umbrella in it, and manually wrapped his fingers around it.

"Hold onto it."

The moment he let go, the black folding umbrella hit the ground with a clunk.

Huang Fan bent over, picked it up and placed it in Xu Ping's hand again.

And it fell to the ground again.

Huang Fan looked up at the ceiling for a few seconds before smiling again. "All right, you selfish boy. I don't want this back. It'll be a gift, okay?"

Solemnly, he placed the umbrella back in Xu Ping's hand and wrapped his hand around the younger man's hand, holding it in place.

He stayed like that for a long time, but when he slowly let go, the umbrella fell yet again.

He bent over to pick it up, but when he straightened his back, he threw it down in an explosion of fury.

"What the fuck do you want, Xu Ping?!"

Speechlessly, Xu Ping picked up the umbrella and placed it in the basket of a bicycle parked in the corridor.

"So you want to draw the lines after using me, and go separate ways from here on out?" He scoffed. "You wish!"

Xu Ping stuck a hand out into the rain, testing. "Whatever you want to think, I'm leaving."

Huang Fan lunged and grabbed his arm, chest heaving roughly as he managed his frustration. "Don't do this, Xu Ping. I had no idea he would come back all of a sudden. He told me he would spend the weekend at home. If he hadn't interrupted, you'd be mine now! Think about it from my side. This isn't my fault!"

Xu Ping faced away and didn't speak.

A sliver of hope blossomed in Huang Fan. He wrapped his arms tightly around Xu Ping. "If there's anything I can do, just tell me. My place is no good now, but if you want, there's a motel nearby. We can go there –"

Xu Ping shoved him away.

"You still don't understand, Huang Fan. I'm not angry with you. I'm not angry at all. I'm just disappointed – disappointed with myself. I did something very wrong. I shouldn't have come here. The one I love is not you, and I don't want anything to happen between us. The one I love is Xu Zheng. I was only able to get it up by pretending you were him."

Huang Fan stayed quiet for a second before responding, “Yeah, I know. So what? Pretend I’m your brother, then.”

Xu Ping looked down and was momentarily quiet in contemplation. “No.”

Flinging the older man’s hand away, he walked into the rain. Instantly, his clothes became soaked.

As Huang Fan watched the figure under the streetlights, a shout escaped his lips. “XU PING!”

Holding his shirt together, Xu Ping turned his head. His wet hair hung in lumpy strands down his forehead.



It was raining so hard that his eyes could barely stay open.

In that moment, there were so many things Huang Fan wished to tell Xu Ping. That he was likely on the blacklist already. That he was going to be imprisoned as a political criminal – five years, ten years, or twenty years – and he would have merely a fraction of his life left after the sentence. That he hoped to have a taste of joy for just one night with Xu Ping even if that meant he would be treated as a substitute.

But the words that came close to a plea were not uttered.

Xu Ping gave him a slight nod before quickly disappearing around a rainy street corner.

Twenty-eight



"*I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice; only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before my house.*

The livelong day has passed in spreading his seat on the floor; but the lamp has not been lit and I cannot ask him into my house.

I live in the hope of meeting with him; but this meeting is not yet.

–Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*

CRACK!

Silvery lightning arced across the night sky. Four or five seconds later, thunder boomed.

Xu Ping shivered like a leaf as he rummaged for the house keys, a small puddle forming by his feet.

The house was not illuminated by lights but by the television screen on which a dubbed black-and-white film, *Waterloo Bridge*, was playing.

"But you don't know me!" The woman argued anxiously.

"I'll discover you, spend the rest of my life doing it." The man held her gaze steadily.

"*Xiao*-Zheng?"

No answer came.

Xu Ping reached for the switch on the wall, but the lights in the living room did not turn on.

Right when he was pulling his hand back, somebody grabbed it, almost making him scream.

"*Xiao*-Zheng?!"

The other hand is big, dry and warm.

Xu Ping only grew easy as his eyes made out his brother's silhouette in the darkness.

"Why didn't you answer when I called you?"

Xu Zheng thought for a second. "The light bulb broke."

Xu Ping stayed silent for a while before taking his hand back. "Oh, really? Leave it. I'll change it later."

He didn't give an explanation for his late return home, and Xu Zheng didn't inquire either, as though he forgot.

The wall clock ticked on.

Xu Ping remarked quietly after shivering, "It's raining so hard outside."

"Yeah." A pause. "Your hand is wet."

A smile found its way to Xu Ping's lips. "Have you eaten yet?"

Xu Zheng shook his head.

"I'm going to take a shower and get changed. I'll make some rice vermicelli later."

Having gotten used to the dark living room, Xu Ping found the white incandescent light rather harsh. He squinted at the wall, its tiles a shade of oddly frightening white.

The latch on the door had been broken for a few weeks now and still had not been fixed.

He was soaked to his underwear. His sneakers squeaked with every step that he made like a sponge being squeezed. He took off his socks and found the skin on his toes all wrinkly.

With no buttons to hold his shirt together, he had to do the job with his hands on the way home as he hurried past all the pedestrians holding an umbrella, afraid to look up. He had not felt it in the midst of crazed indulgence, but the moment clarity came to him, the shame and guilt seemed to swallow him whole. There was money in his pocket, but he was too self-conscious to take the bus, so he walked all the way home.

His body heat completely washed away by the rainwater, Xu Ping was so cold his teeth were chattering.

Stripping off the clothes heavy with water, he stepped into the tub eagerly.

The moment the hot water splashed onto his skin, he felt a tingle followed by a burning sensation. It was as if his nerve endings were damaged to the point of confusing the sensation of hot and cold.

He closed his eyes as the water fell onto his head.

Only after he felt his body warming up again did he reach over to draw the curtain, but he stopped dead in his tracks.

Xu Zheng was standing in the bathroom eyeing him with a haunting stare.

Most likely due to the forceful handling, his chest and thighs were spotted with purplish fingerprints. The four-digit bruises on his butt cheeks were still very much present. His nipples were also red and swollen, appearing provocatively beautiful.

Xu Ping quickly pulled the curtain shut, barking, “Get out! Who told you to come in here?!”

The water splish-splashed away, but Xu Zheng did not answer.

Xu Ping took the shampoo container and hurled it outward. “Out!”

He heard the container clunk against the floor and bounce up to hit something else which led to even more clatter.

Then dead silence.

He sat in the tub hugging his legs, shivering.

Finally after ages, he lifted an edge of the curtain and looked out. His brother was long gone.

Water was bubbling noisily in the aluminum pot. He opened the lid, and white hot steam rushed at his face.

Xu Ping put in a handful of vermicelli and gave it a good stir. Then he made two omelettes.

And that was dinner.

Xu Ping placed a pair of chopsticks on the bowl before his brother. “Eat.”

Xu Zheng slowly picked up the utensils but his eyes never left his older brother.

Xu Ping just kept his head down eating.

Not enough salt. Oh well. It was too much of a bother to get it.

The egg was overcooked. He took a bite and felt there were bits of egg yolk stuck to his teeth.

Waterloo Bridge was coming to an end. Myra jumped, falling under speeding wheels, and the score began to play.

“I loved you. I’ve never loved anyone else. I never shall. That’s the truth, Roy. I never shall.”

Xu Ping went over and turned off the television.

He accidentally knocked down his chopsticks when getting back to his seat. He bent down to pick them up.

On the way back from the kitchen, he grabbed the salt. He sprinkled a little and stirred the noodles with the chopsticks, but it still didn’t taste like anything.

The hands on the wall clock pointed to nine-forty.

Unable to ignore it any longer, Xu Ping slapped his chopsticks onto the table and faced Xu Zheng with a glare. “What’re you looking at?!”

Xu Zheng replied, face emotionless, “I look at *Gege*’s neck.”

Xu Ping faltered as his hand involuntarily went up to his neck.

“There are handprints on your neck.”

Huang Fan had used a lot of force when he strangled him. Xu Ping didn’t even notice it had left marks.

“Why are handprints there?” His younger brother asked lowly while holding his chopsticks in an awkward position.

He continued his questioning, slowly but surely, and kept eye contact with his brother. “Where did *Gege* go today? I waited for you. You said you would come back soon. Who were you with? *Gege* –”

SCREEEECH.

The chair scraped harshly against the floor.

Xu Ping sprung up, hands on the table, chest heaving. Only after some time did he gather his breath and hiss coldly, “None of your business!”



His brother was apparently angry.

Xu Ping was washing the dishes in the kitchen when he heard the bedroom door slam shut. Xu Ping froze for a second but continued his work as though nothing had happened.

After he stepped out of the kitchen, he found the lights off in his brother’s bedroom. He turned the doorknob but found it locked from the inside.

Only then did a hint of despair appear on his lowered face.

One by one, he turned off the lights in the rest of the house, letting it return to the embrace of darkness.

Lying down under the sheets, he felt as if his body were a loose pile of mud.

It was dark and quiet. From the bed, the ceilings seemed higher than he had imagined.

Huang Fan had screamed his name in the rain but did not say a single word. Xu Ping thought it was because the man knew they would never meet again.

When Huang Fan's roommate barged in through the door, Xu Ping was startled and caught off guard. Huang Fan pressed his face down into the couch, and without skipping a beat, exchanged a few light words with his roommate the details of which Xu Ping had no memory. He couldn't even remember if the stranger had seen his face or not.

Intelligent and collected, Huang Fan never let any difficulty or challenge hinder him, but Xu Ping couldn't find it in himself to feel positive towards this man.

What frustrated Xu Ping more was the fact that his brother had seen the bruises on his body. He checked in the mirror earlier and saw that the thumb prints on his neck were slightly purple. His nipples were extremely swollen, and the other marks on his body left him feeling incredibly embarrassed. He quickly covered it with clothes, not daring to take a second glance.

He could have covered his tracks with lies, but for some reason he was in such shock looking at Xu Zheng's stern gaze that he couldn't get a peep out.

Since when did his brother learn how to question him?

Xu Ping rolled around in frustration.

Oh well. That boy wouldn't understand anyway. If he asked again, he would simply say he was in a fight.

As he decided this, he let his eyes droop shut.

Perhaps because of his exhaustion, he fell into a deep slumber very quickly. He dreamt he was running for his life along the rails in a long, dark tunnel. The headlights of the train were flashing like the eyes of a wolf, trailing behind him, getting closer and closer, until the train crushed him under its wheels. He shot up in pain, shouting, only to find his naked brother lying on him.

He was dumbfounded for three seconds, and then he demanded angrily, “What are you doing here?!” as he tried to push his brother off. “Get off of me!”

Xu Zheng looked down at him, not moving an inch.

Xu Ping was a little disturbed by his expression and gave another push. “Get off!”

“No!”

Xu Ping froze.

“What did you say?!”

Xu Zheng suddenly pulled on his shirt, and the two began wrestling on the bed.

The tank top was ripped very quickly, and Xu Zheng threw it down to the ground in a furious fit.

Unable to stand this, Xu Ping slapped his brother across the face.

Xu Zheng’s face flew to the side and stayed there for some time.

When he eventually turned back around, there was an expression of fury and rebellion.

He grabbed his older brother’s wrist and twisted roughly.

Xu Ping yelped in pain.

His underwear was pulled off, and the quilt fell to the floor.

Scared and shocked, Xu Ping put all his effort into kicking at his brother, but the teenager caught his legs with his own.

His limbs were all secured to the bed. Xu Ping was like a fish on a chopping board, doing his best to flop his way off, only to be pinned back down by Xu Zheng.

His brother pressed down like a boulder.

“Don’t do this, *Xiao*-Zheng. Don’t…” Xu Ping pleaded with despair as he continued to struggle.

Meanwhile, his brother had become erect from the wrestling. The burning erection poked at his abdomen through a pair of underpants, and the more he struggled the harder it became.

Soon his energy was drained, and his efforts to break free grew weak.

His brother held him down in a position like a wrestler's hold. With their fingers and legs interlocked, his feeble attempts were no longer resistance but rather the lustful teases between lovers.

Xu Zheng was breathing down his neck. Skin to skin. The air was filled with the boy's scent.

"No, we can't do this…" But even as he said so, to his own dismay he became hard. His rationality told him to resist, but his body wanted nothing but to indulge. Xu Ping felt as though he were walking on a tightrope high in the air. His soul itself was just about to split in half.

Xu Zheng splayed on hand on his chest and began touching his nipples roughly.

"There are fingerprints here." The boy said.

Xu Ping shook as he clenched his teeth.

His brother did not leave his lower half untouched and began kneading his crotch.

"There are here too."

The veins on Xu Ping's neck were about to pop.

"*Gege* was touched." He accused angrily. "Here. Here. And here!"

As he spoke, he touched Xu Ping all over as though to vent his anger.

Finally, Xu Ping could no longer keep silent. "Yes! I was touched! And so what?! I wanted to be touched! It has nothing to do with you! Let go of me!"

Xu Zheng stayed frozen for quite some time until sadness, anger and disbelief all appeared on his face at once. He tightened his grip on Xu Ping's wrist, almost making Xu Ping whimper in pain.

"NO!" He bellowed. "NO! NO! NO!"

"*GEGE* IS MINE! MINE! ONLY MINE!"

With desperate tears in his eyes, Xu Ping shook his head.

"*GEGE* IS MINE!" Xu Zheng repeated each word with frightening emotion on his face.

"No, *Xiao*-Zheng. That's not true."

Xu Zheng stared at him for what seemed like hours. Then he raised his head to the sky and screamed like a madman.

Xu Ping shut his eyes tightly.

Xu Zheng dipped his head down again and bit his brother's collarbone so hard that blood quickly trickled out of the corner of his lips.

Xu Ping yelped painfully.

He pulled at Xu Zheng's hair, but the teenager would not let go no matter what.

Xu Ping let his head fall back and bore with the pain, his hands creating ugly wrinkles in the bed sheets.

Amidst such pain, he could somehow feel a twisted sense of happiness. It was as if the unspeakable love that he harboured for his brother, a sin of unforgivable immorality, could only be expressed in this warped and painful way.

Letting out a shout of his own, Xu Ping held his brother's head and kissed the boy with everything he had.

The two became tangled in their embrace, their tongues never separating for even a moment.

The taste of rust became an aphrodisiac for Xu Ping, driving him to shake with excitement.

The two of them rolled from one end of the bed to the other. Xu Zheng held his brother so tightly, as if he wanted to embed him into his own body.

Xu Ping felt like he was falling off the tightrope. His penis rubbed against his brother. His hand rushed to touch every inch of his brother's back. He wanted to say to the boy, "Tighter. Tighter. I

want you to crush me to pieces before you let me go.” But his tongue was busy battling with that of his brother.

Shutting his eyes, he guided the boy’s hands to explore his own body, and the two continued into the madness.

He didn’t want to think. He wanted only to fall, to keep falling, faster and faster. He could not see his surroundings and lost awareness of the ground and the sky. Just as time got lost amidst the tunes of the merry-go-around, he wanted to forget it all and let it all come to an end when he hit the ground.

He heard a small exclamation from his brother. Splutters of white fluid landed on his abdomen.

Everything came to a grinding stop. The tightrope-walking clown opened his eyes and found one of his feet not on the rope. The show was still going on. The fall was nothing but a fuzzy daydream.

He shoved his brother away and fell off the bed.

Xu Zheng was sprawled on the bed, panting wildly. He had just experienced his first ever ejaculation.

His semen had fallen on Xu Ping’s abdomen in a few sticky puddles.

Xu Ping ran his hand through them and found the fluid thick and gamy, forming silvery strands between his fingers like a spider’s silk.

He stared unbelievingly at his own hand. Slowly, he slumped to the floor and, with his hands tearing at his hair, began crying.

Twenty-nine



"*All is fate*

All is smoke
All is a beginning without an end
All is a search that dies at birth

–Bei Dao, *All*

"Senior high, third year division three, Ms. Li Xiuyun, senior high, third year division three, Ms. Li Xiuyun, please report to the infirmary immediately."

When this announcement played on the screechy public address system, Xu Ping was lying, eyes shut, on the white cot in the infirmary.

"What in the world happened?"

"He got hit by a basketball."

"No way? A basketball? Look at these bruises on his face!"

"It wasn't me. His face was bruised when he came to school on Monday. I only hit the back of his head!"

"For goodness' sake, the guy fainted. Don't act so innocent!"

"There's always bumps and scuffles in basketball. It wasn't on purpose. Who knew he'd be that weak. I even asked him when I hit

him, and he said he was fine. Then he took two steps and toppled over. I had to haul him all the way here."

"Hey, hey. Out of the way. Out of the way. The nurse is here."

"Sir,[51] is he okay?"

"…nothing too serious. It's probably because of stress and a lack of sleep. See these bags under his eyes? Oh, right. You are third year students, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. You have to take a closer look and tell me he is okay for sure. He's the top of our class. The school's looking at him to make Tsinghua or Peking. If anything affects his exam results, our homeroom teacher is going to kill me."

"Don't worry. It's just over-exhaustion. A good diet and some sleep will do him good. He's young; he'll recover in no time."

"That's good. You hear that, Liu Wen? It wasn't my fault."

"Consider yourself lucky this time, you idiot."

"Shut the fuck up! Quit jinxing me, you little shit!"

"Hey, if you don't have any business here, get out, all of you. Don't create more problems in the infirmary. The patient needs to rest."

"Goodbye, sir."

White walls. White curtains. White quilt. White ceiling.

Xu Ping opened his eyes just a crack before closing them.

Tired. Don't want to move.

The air smelled like iodine tincture. There was someone humming what seemed to be Hou Dejian's *Descendants of the Dragon*.

The door burst open.

"Mr. Chen, I came as soon as I heard the PA. Is Xu Ping all right?"

[51] The original text does not define the nurse's gender, but for the convenience of translation, I will designate the nurse as male.

It was Ms. Li, the homeroom teacher.

"He's fine. He fainted after being hit by a basketball during PE class. He's lying back there."

Xu Ping heard curtains being drawn. The two staff members stood by his cot to observe his condition.

"He's asleep. Maybe he's too tired." The nurse lowered his voice. "Let's leave him to rest."

"What happened? How could he be that reckless during PE?"

"The main issue isn't PE. He doesn't look well. He has very dark bags under his eyes. It looks like he hasn't gotten much sleep for quite some time."



Ms. Lee sighed.

"Here's my two cents: It could be the stress of the examination. With these emotional issues, it'd be best if his teachers and parents provided some counselling. Otherwise, it'll be hard for him to perform well."

"I'll speak with him when he wakes."

"I took care of the injuries on his face, too. Was he in a fight? He has all these bruises."

Ms. Lee sighed again, replying, "I also asked him about it a few days ago, but he insisted he fell down the stairs. See, this kid has a complicated background. His mother passed away many years ago, and his father's frequently away from home for work. It's just him and his younger brother at home. And his brother, well, he has some problems up here. He's a retard."

"You're kidding."

"It's true. He's very close with his brother. Initially, he didn't even want to put down any schools outside the province because he wanted to go to a school here. I had to give him a stern talk in my office to make him consider otherwise. So, okay, he came in this Monday with his application filled out, but his face was covered with bruises. I asked if his brother beat him because the boy didn't

want him to go to Beijing, but he assured me that wasn't the case. But let's be honest here. I'm an old lady, and I've seen enough in my days. If you ask me, it was definitely his brother. A retard wouldn't know boundaries. A retard only knows to vent his anger. And that's why Xu Ping's like this."

"Poor child."

"I know. I've seen his brother once. A scary giant of a boy. All muscle. He looks like a monster of sorts. And his retard brain is the worse problem. He might not remember you even if you gave him the nicest treatment. He usually looks nice and quiet, but you say one wrong word, and he goes crazy, hitting people – the works. Nobody can hold him down. If you ask me, someone like that in your family must have been sent by karma to repay the debt you owe from the previous life. What suffering that must be!"



"I had no idea."

"I know. What a poor kid…"

Xu Ping's lashes fluttered a few times before he slowly rolled over and fell asleep.

"We must follow the Three Rules of Discipline, and we must not forget the Eight Points for Attention. One, be polite when speaking. Respect the crowds, and do not act prideful…"

One by one, trucks loaded with soldiers drove past on the road. White banners stretched across the body of the trucks reading, "PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY IS FOR THE PEOPLE." The squad leaders led their soldiers in singing *The Three Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points for Attention*, their voices booming far and wide.

The passengers on the No. 18 bus all strained their necks to look. One was counting with her[52] fingers, "One, two, three, four…"

[52] The passenger has been designated as female.

“Why are so many soldiers heading into town?” Xu Ping heard another passenger complaining quietly.

The man sitting a row ahead of Xu Ping was shaking out a copy of *People’s Daily* to read. Xu Ping poked his head out and caught a glimpse of the headlines:

“The Necessity of Identifying the Nature of the Unrest and Enforcing Strict Punishment.” June 3rd, 1989. Xinhua News Agency.

Xu Ping frowned.

The vehicle jounced over a pothole, and the rough shake prompted him to grab the handle on the seat in front of him.

The brother grabbed his arm, but Xu Ping shook it off almost as soon as he did.

He turned towards the window to avoid seeing his brother’s reaction.

The sun was about to set, dyeing the entire river a gentle amber. To the left of the water was the newly built part of town with its lively, tall buildings. To the right were a few run-down factories with their giant red brick chimneys shooting for the sky.

It seemed that almost every day for the past few years there had been new things being born and old ones dying out. The city kept changing its face – road construction, tear-downs, new houses – slowly becoming a totally different entity. The new buildings were indeed tall and beautiful, but for some reason it saddened him to see the old buildings which housed his childhood memories being torn down.

Xu Ping carefully eased the window down a little. A gust of river air tousled his hair.

“*Gege*.”

Xu Ping feigned ignorance.

“*Gege*.”

Xu Ping heard but was too annoyed to bother.

Xu Zheng placed a hand on his brother's lap but was roughly pushed away.

The bus came to a sudden stop, the momentum flinging all of its passengers forward.

The driver turned to everybody. "The road ahead is blocked off. I can't get through."

The passengers opened the windows sticking their heads out only to see the familiar road blocked off with road blocks and metal mesh. The shops were all closed, and there were armed police giving directions for cars and diverting the crowd.

"Does this mean we're going under martial law?" Someone wondered quietly.

The wind blew the newspaper out of the man's hands. Xu Ping bent over and picked it up.

Underneath the extra bold font on the front page was a smaller line:

"We must fight the unrest with a clear-cut stand."

The paper flapped noisily in the wind. Xu Ping folded the pages and held the corners down before reading.

On the way home from the bus stop, neither of them spoke.

The clouds in the sky had turned a million shades of purple with the ones by the west horizon tinted in brilliant red hues. The brisk wind made his pants legs flap.

His dad had called the previous night asking about the situation at home. After hearing about Xu Ping's university choices, he stayed silent for a while before expressing happy relief and encouragement.

When it came time for Xu Zheng to speak, the boy only held the receiver and stared straight at his older brother.

Xu Ping could guess what his dad said. It didn't stray far from warning his brother not to disturb his study because he was aiming

for a good university out of town and asking him to learn to be independent because his older brother would not always be there.

His brother held the phone without saying a word.

That night, Xu Ping locked himself in his room studying while listening to smashing and shattering coming from the living room. When he opened the door, he was welcomed by a huge mess.

Since that night of confused emotions, Xu Ping had been avoiding Xu Zheng constantly. Unless it was necessary, he didn't want to say anything to him. As the dishes crashed and shattered on to the floor, Xu Ping clenched his fist and forced himself, stroke after stroke, to write the mock exam. In the end, he hit his head against the desk out of pure despair.



Just a while longer. Just a bit…

On that night of hopeless tears, he made up his mind to sever this twisted love. Perhaps his sense of love had become so muddied because he had stayed with his brother for far too long. If he could attend university somewhere far away, everything should return to normal after four years, shouldn't it?

SCREEEECH!

Xu Ping was suddenly stopped by his brother's hug from behind.

The window of a grey sedan was rolled down, and a middle-aged driver popped out his head, roaring, "What the hell, you blind or what?! It's red! You wanna die?!"

In a stupor, Xu Ping took a few seconds to respond. "Sorry about that. I wasn't paying attention."

"You need some help walking, boy?! How fucking old are you?! Even an elementary kid knows how to cross the damn street!"

"Sorry."

The driver rolled up the window, cursing and spitting, before speeding off.

Xu Ping brushed his brother's arms away. Xu Zheng wrapped them around him again. Xu Ping brushed them away again.

The light flashed green and the people began pushing forward, but quite a few cyclists were turning to look at these two.

Xu Ping hurried after the crowd and left his brother behind.

Xu Zheng faltered and stayed standing in the spot.

The light went from green to yellow, then yellow to red.

Xu Zheng looked up and saw his brother standing on the other side of the road. He had only lifted his foot when Xu Ping screamed at the top of his lungs, “Don’t move!”

Startled, Xu Zheng stayed in the silly position with one leg up.

Cars drove past one after another. The light went from red to green.

Xu Ping dashed across the intersection, grabbed his brother and stomped off.

The two of them walked like that for a great distance, the younger behind the elder, until their complex came into view. Then Xu Ping shoved his brother on the chest, scolding, “Who told you to save me?! Why are you trying to save me?! You can’t even cross the road yourself! You know nothing! Why don’t you learn to protect yourself first?!”

Xu Zheng stumbled back a few steps, hand on his chest, dumbly watching his brother, and eventually hung his head low.

Thirty



"*All joy lacks smiles*
All sorrow lacks tears
All language is repetition
All contact a first encounter

–Bei Dao, *All*

"Urgent announcement from the Chinese People's Liberation Army: the army, local police force and armed police force have liberty to enforce martial law through any means necessary. Protest organizers and rioters are solely responsible for all consequences…"

Xu Ping stood in front of the television, reading the rolling notice in silence.

His brother was not in the living room. Xu Zheng had shut himself in his room for the whole evening, ignoring even knocks on his door.

The clock ticked until eleven-thirty on that night of unrest and insomnia.

Brrrrrring-brrrrrring! The phone began ringing.

"Hello?" Xu Ping picked up.

No response came for some time.

"Hello? Is that you, Dad?"

Nothing.

"Helloooo?"

Fucking pranksters! He was just about to hang up when he heard a feeble voice.

"Xu Ping."

"Huang Fan?"

Xu Ping pressed the receiver back against his ear and tried for a long time to find something to say.

He heard a series of cracks and bangs from the other end like fireworks or firecrackers. "Where are you?"

The man did not reply.

"The martial law notice has been playing on TV this whole time. Are you still at the square?" He cupped a hand around the receiver and pressed his voice low. "They say it's very dangerous out there. Don't hang around any longer. Hurry home!"

All he heard was heavy breathing from the other end.

"What's that over there? Why are you guys playing with firecrackers now of all times?!"

Huang Fan started chuckling softly for a while. "Yeah, we just wanted to have some fun while we still could. We'll be done soon."

Xu Ping didn't reply. Something in Huang Fan's voice made him very uneasy, but he could not figure it out in the moment.

"How are you, Xu Ping?"

"I'm all right."

"…not going to ask about me?"

After a pause, Xu Ping asked, "How are you, Huang Fan?"

"I'm good."

It was such a normal conversation, yet Xu Ping felt the tiny hairs on his body bristling.

"Xu Ping."

"Yeah?"

But the man didn't say anything for a very long time.

“What the hell is going on, Huang Fan?”

Huang Fan laughed. “Nothing, just wanted to call you for some reason.”

“Call me, now out of all times?! Do you not know the city is under martial law?!”

Huang Fan stayed quiet for some time before asking abruptly, “I always wanted to ask you if you had any dreams you wanted to make come true.”

Xu Ping faltered. “No, I don’t. I’m not a very ambitious person. I just want to live a normal life with my family.”



“You have nothing you really, really want?”

“I do. I want my brother to become normal, but that doesn’t seem very feasible, so I don’t think about it much.”

“That’s great.” Huang paused. “Growing up, I thought I was like a rat living in the gutters. The other kids were all nice and clean while I was the only one who was dirty and stinky. Nothing could rid me of the smells I had. So the biggest dream I had was to be able to not lie in the gutters one day, but sadly this hasn’t come true yet.”

“Why are you telling me this? Where in the world are you, Huang Fan?”

“Xu Ping, if you didn’t have your brother, would you want to be with me?”

Xu Ping considered for a moment and answered slowly, “I don’t know.”

Huang Fan started laughing again, but laughter turned into coughing.

“I really envy Xu Zheng. He might be an idiot, but he has someone like you loving him wholeheartedly.”

Xu Ping clenched his fist. “Stop talking.”

Huang Fan chuckled. “What are you afraid of? You know, Xu Ping, your biggest fault is being hesitant and fearful, always keeping

yourself in a tight frame, unable to relax for even a second. Let me guess. Did you put down Beijing schools on your application?"

Xu Ping clenched his teeth.

"You want to force yourself to be apart from your brother, thinking that would sever your feelings for him." He began laughing and coughing simultaneously. "Xu Ping, you truly are the biggest fool I've ever seen. What's the point living like this?"

"Did you call just to make fun of me?" Xu Ping spit coldly.

Huang Fan continued without paying heed. "If I were you, Xu Ping, and I met someone I liked, I wouldn't give a damn about what anybody says. I'd hold onto him with everything I got and never let go."

"He's my brother!" Xu Ping snapped.

"So what? Does he like you?"

Xu Ping didn't speak.

After a spell of violent coughing, Huang Fan continued quietly, "Really, Xu Ping, I really envy your brother."

"What's there to envy? He's just an idiot."

"Yeah, that's why I envy him. He has obtained what I want without lifting a single finger, but he doesn't have the slightest clue as to its value."

Xu Ping chose to stay quiet.

As he listened to the man's heavy breathing, a firecracker seemed to explode near him on the other end. *BOOM!*

Xu Ping shuddered.

"Huang Fan! Are you really playing with firecrackers?! Where are you?! The People's Square?!" He shouted into the receiver.

Huang Fan laughed. "Yeah, we're at the square with firecrackers. The *ertijiao*[53] is pretty loud. Why, did it scare you?"

Xu Ping couldn't speak through his clenched jaws.

[53] A traditional type of firecracker.

“You’re too much of a scaredy-cat, Xu Ping. You need to let yourself go. Sometimes you have to let go first to get what you want. But,” he coughed through his laughter, “it’s not good to be too reckless, like me.”

“Huang Fan, you’re wounded, aren’t you?”

Silence on the other end, then weak chuckles. “Amazing. You could tell over the phone. I was caught off guard by the firecracker and fell down some steps and bumped my head. Don’t worry, though, it’s just a light scratch. It’ll go away tomorrow morning.”

Xu Ping covered his eyes trying to push back the tears.

“Oh no, Xu Ping, we can’t talk anymore. I borrowed a Brick from a friend from Hong Kong, and the minutes are very expensive, and the battery is about to die. Say goodbye to me, Xu Ping.”

“Huang Fan, you fucking bastard! Why the hell did you call me?! You don’t want me to rest easy, do you?!”

After a long pause, a quiet response came. “I’m sorry, Xu Ping. I’m a selfish person. If I could, I really want to see you again. I miss you. I’m sorry.”

Doo-doo-doo. The tone began to play.

“Hello?! Hello?!” Xu Ping yelled into the receiver, but the connection had been terminated.

He smashed the receiver back onto the phone.

The martial law announcement kept rolling across the television screen.

“Urgent announcement from the Chinese People’s Liberation Army: the army, local police force and armed police force have liberty to enforce martial law through any means necessary. Protest organizers and rioters are solely responsible for all consequences…”

Biting his nails frantically, Xu Ping paced the room a few times before dashing to his bedroom for a jacket.

He knocked loudly on his brother’s door. “*Xiao*-Zheng, I’m heading out for a bit.”

His brother didn't answer.

When he was getting out his sneakers from the closet, his brother finally came out from his room.

"Where are you going, *Gege*?"

After slipping on his shoes and grabbing his keys, Xu Ping turned around. "I'm going out for a bit. Be back very soon. You stay here. Don't go anywhere."

Wearing a tank top and shorts, Xu Zheng shot forward and grabbed him. "I go, too."

Xu Ping eyed him and then gave him a powerful shove, warning sternly, "You stay home, and don't go anywhere!"

Xu Zheng heard the front door locking from the outside. After a moment of stupor, he leaned out the balcony and saw his brother racing out the building wearing a grey jacket and blue jeans.

Leaning on the railing, he hollered, "*GEGE*!"

Xu Ping didn't hear. His running was swift and nimble, like a soaring bird, flashing once under the streetlight before disappearing into the vast darkness.

Thirty-one

"*All love is in the heart*

All past is in a dream

–Bei Dao, *All*



One streetlight, and then another.

There was someone singing quietly somewhere in the night.

"In the ancient Orient is a dragon. Its name is the Middle Kingdom;[54] In the ancient Orient is a tribe. They are all descendants of the dragon…"

The stars in the sky were blazing away from thousands of light years away in space. After a hundred thousand years, two hundred thousand years, what was left by the time their light reached this tiny, infamous planet was but a lifeless spark. Compared to the stars, the life of humans was as short as the life of a flower. A life could end in the blink of an eye. However, even the seemingly eternal constellations cooled and died after burning all of their energy and would eventually become space dust, defeated by the laws of time.

Xu Ping gasped for air as he leaned on a power line pole.

The pole was covered with ads and flyers of all colours. Beside the ad for psoriasis was a white notice with the word 'democracy' in

[54] The direct translation of the Chinese name for 'China' in English.

huge font. Someone had torn off half of it, leaving the other half flapping in the night wind.

The People's Square was just a right turn away. He could faintly hear the commotion from here.

The main road leading to the square was brightly lit. Military vehicles drove past one by one.

Xu Ping felt a burning anxiety, but his legs would not step forward as though they were lead-laden.

A quick rest. Just a quick rest, he thought.

He heard footsteps approach him from behind – *slappity slap slap* – and stop somewhere behind him.

"*Gege*."

Still holding the pole, Xu Ping looked up in surprise. "*Xiao*-Zheng?! How did you get out?"

His brother was still wearing a tank top, shorts and a pair of blue plastic slippers from home. It seemed like he had fallen along the way, as his top and knees were grey with dirt.

"So? How did you get out?! I locked the door!"

His brother hung his head low. "I climbed down from the balcony."

His vision suddenly seemed to flicker in and out, and he couldn't see very well for some time. He asked quietly, trying to ignore the discomfort, "How did you climb down from the balcony?"

"…along the pipe."

There was indeed a pipe for the drainage of the rooftop nailed to the wall right next to the balcony and leading straight down to the gutter on the ground.

Furious and upset, Xu Ping kicked his brother. "Are you insane?! Do you know how much you weigh?! What if the pipe broke and you fell from up there?!"

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became, and soon he was using his fists as well.

His brother stood there and didn't budge while taking the beating.

Xu Ping leaned on the pole, panting for a while before recovering.

"You go home." He fished out his keys from his pocket. "Take the keys and go in through the door."

"What about you, *Gege*?"

"I still have something to do, can't go with you."

"…I'll go with you."

Xu Ping barked, "What do you want with me?!"

Xu Zheng gazed at him dumbly.

Xu Ping gave him a shove. "Go home!"

His brother stepped back.

Xu Ping shoved him again. The boy backed up again.

"I'm telling you to go home. Are you deaf?!" Xu Ping snapped.

Xu Zheng straightened himself and diverted his gaze sideways to the road. "I'm not going home."

"What did you say?! You say that again!"

Xu Zheng didn't speak.

Xu Ping grabbed him by the tank top and shoved him back, but this time Xu Zheng flung him aside.

"I won't go home!" The boy roared. "I know! You want me to wait at home and you go see that bad person! I don't want to go home! You're mine, *Gege*! Only mine!"

Xu Ping was pushed to the ground and stayed there for some time before staggering to his feet and dusting himself off.

He thrust his keys in Xu Zheng's hand and held the boy's shoulders as he instructed, "You listen to me now, Xu Zheng. You go home straight away. If I find you taking one step after me, I will disown you as my brother!"

He shoved Xu Zheng on the back, making the boy stumble forward. Xu Zheng turned to look at his brother to find a cold, hard frown.

"*Gege*."

"GO HOME!"

After standing there with his head down, Xu Zheng eventually started walking. Every few steps or so, he would take a look back at his brother. His *gege*'s shadow under the streetlight seemed very drawn-out.

Only when Xu Zheng disappeared around the corner did Xu Ping hurry along towards the square.



When Xu Ping recalled this night many, many years later, he would feel as though it was all a dream. Everything seemed hazy. He thought he remembered but when he thought about it carefully, the faces and the words in the depth of his memory all seemed to dissipate like fog.

Of course, the Xu Ping many, many years later was an extremely different person from the current Xu Ping. Years of life trained him to endure and be wary. He began to believe in the evil of man, that humans could commit heinous crimes without any self-restraint. He began to doubt the sincerity of others' words and didn't display any joy even from being praised. He became a person not so different from the thousands of others in this society. Cold and cautious, he wrapped his precious things deeper and deeper in his heart, never said anything he shouldn't have said, and didn't do what he shouldn't have done. It's not to say that this Xu Ping was bad. It's just that he had paid a heavy price to become an adult.

Each one of us loses the naivety in our heart as we grow up, some earlier than others. Some are like lemons being grated for their zest, slowly being ground into the shape of an adult's by the forces of life. Others are like porcelain shattering on the floor into a

gazillion pieces. They have to crawl back up and try their best to piece themselves back together, and in this process it's not unusual to lose a piece here or gain a piece there. By the end of it all, each will have become a brand new person.

Our protagonist, Xu Ping, was now only eighteen years old, thirty three days away from the nation-wide postsecondary entrance examination. He was presently racing through the city street in the dark of night.



Weeewooo…

The sirens blared as the ambulance sped past him.

It was nearing midnight, but people still lingered on the street.

This street was brightly lit while the surrounding city was dim. The closest light source was an old, gloomy streetlight in an alley some way off. Its light only formed a tiny circle before the dark swallowed it. This gave Xu Ping a strange, illusory feeling as though he were not walking on a street but standing on a grand stage.

He passed by many people all of whose expressions were stranded between joy and sorrow as though they were marionettes. Their mouths were open in the midst of speech, but Xu Ping couldn't make out what they were saying.

He was tired from running, gasping for air, but he couldn't stop.

The ground was littered with shards of broken glass. The horizon appeared to burn in an unnatural red.

He watched as frightened people ran towards him, brushed past him and sprinted in the opposite direction as him.

He slowed his pace and plowed his way through the crowd.

There were fences and road blocks several hundred metres from the square, leaving only one section cleared for entry and exit. Beside it were a handful of police vehicles and numerous armed police on patrol.

Xu Ping walked towards the entrance.

“Oi, oi! What’re you doing?!” Someone in green uniform barred his way.

“I’m going in.”

The man eyed him. “You can’t go in here!”

“My friend is in there!”

The man scoffed. “You can’t even if your parents are in here.”

Xu Ping stared at the man.

“What’re you looking at?! Are you deaf? You heard what I said?!”

“My friend is hurt. I have to save him!”

“I don’t care who your friend is. We have orders, and no means no! Get out of here!”

“He’s going to die!” Xu Ping shrieked.

The man paused, momentarily stunned, before barking angrily, “Are you fucking stupid?! I said get out of here!”

Xu Ping glared at him for a second and then bolted for the entrance.

The man stopped him and threw him to the ground.

“You wanna die, punk?!”

Xu Ping pushed himself off and ground and lunged for the entrance again, but he was kicked in the stomach and fell with a flop.

He lay on the ground coughing, unable to stand up for some time.

He heard hurried footsteps behind him before he fell into someone’s arms.

“*Gege*!”

He saw his brother’s fists. They were clenched so hard the veins on his forearms were popping out.

He clutched the boy’s arms.

The commotion had attracted the attention of a few more police officers who were now converging on them.

Their leader stomped towards Xu Zheng, shouting. “What’re you doing?!”

Xu Zheng’s eye went wide and his brows scrunched up tightly.

Wobbling, Xu Ping rushed to his feet to come between the two and pushed his brother back. “It’s nothing to do with him. He doesn’t know anything. He came looking for me.”

Xu Zheng maintained his intense glare.

The officer squinted, apparently disgruntled. “What the fuck are you staring at?!”

Only long after a colleague of his slapped him on the back did the undignified policeman avert his eyes.

“How many times have I told you now, no means no! But you still tried to enter by force. You were asking for it!”

He forcefully swept Xu Ping aside. “Out of the way! Go off over there!”

Xu Ping tumbled to the ground with a thump.

Time seemed to slow down as Xu Zheng watched his brother slowly fall to the ground and remain there motionless for a long time. He looked at the policeman leisurely chatting with the person next to him without a care in the world. His pupils enlarged in a split second, and he approached, picking up speed as he neared his target. The man caught sight of him in his peripheral vision and made as if to shout a question when Xu Zheng pounced, knocking him to the ground. The boy held him down and struck a punch with his right hand. Each punch was stronger than the next, and every one met flesh, drawing out blood in a matter of seconds.

The scene escalated very quickly. After an initial stupor, the handful of police officers rushed to restrain Xu Zheng, some grabbing his arms, other his legs, while the boy fought and struggled. Having had enough time to recover, the wounded policeman joined back in for a counterattack.

Xu Ping jumped in wanting to drag out his brother. He hugged the boy's waist, shouting, "*Xiao*-Zheng, stop it! Stop it now!"

"You motherfuckers," someone roared. "Get in here and help now!"

A baton connected with Xu Ping's back, and he flopped to the ground.

The world before his eyes seemed to crack. All around him were flickering shadows and angry shouts.

He kept rolling around trying to dodge the flying arms and legs. He couldn't see anything, but he knew the pain.

Time stopped working, too.

The last scene. He saw his brother holding him, shielding him underneath himself.

He heard the baton land on his brother's back like a low, muffled drumbeat.

Thirty-two

"*All hope carries annotations*

All faith carries groans

–Bei Dao, *All*



SCREEEECH. A metal folding chair was opened.

On the wooden table were a pen, a note pad and a desk lamp.

A middle-aged man in green uniform suddenly sneezed. He took out a grey checkered handkerchief from his pant pocket and began blowing his nose.

Knock-knock-knock.

"Come in."

"Your tea, Sergeant Wang."

"On the table is fine."

Then the wooden door to the interrogation room closed again.

The man scrunched the handkerchief in his hand before stuffing it back into his pocket.

The walls were painted a chilling white, and behind the man were these words painted in huge black font: LENIENCE FOR HONESTY. STRICTNESS FOR RESISTANCE.

He sat down on the chair and twisted the lamp around.

The glaring light made Xu Ping close his eyes in discomfort.

“Name.”

“…Xu Ping.”

“Which ‘ping?’ ”

“The ‘ping’ in ‘ping an.’ ”[55]

“Age.”

“Eighteen.”

“Employer.”

Xu Ping remained silent.

“What do you do?”

“…I’m a student.”

“Which school?”

“Railroads No. 1 Secondary.”

“Class.”

“Senior year three, division three.”

“The university entrance exam is coming up soon, huh.”

“…yes.”

“You’re the same age as my son. He’s taking the exam this year, too.”

Xu Ping looked down and didn’t respond.

“All right, be honest with me.” Wang Yong put down his pen. “What happened last night, and why did you and your brother beat the officers on duty?”

“…my brother doesn’t know anything.”

The man scoffed. “He doesn’t know anything, and he could beat a man half to death?! What a brother you have!”

“It’s true!” Xu Ping shouted frantically. “He’s an idiot! A retard! He didn’t even go to elementary school! If you won’t believe me, go ask my neighbours. They all know! He was looking for me. He’s just a big guy. He doesn’t know anything!”

[55] ‘Ping an’ means peace or peaceful for animate objects, most often humans.

“What’s your brother’s name?”

“Xu Zheng. The ‘zheng’ in ‘zheng yi.’ ”[56]

“Okay.”

“If you have any questions, just ask me. My brother has issues communicating. He doesn’t know how to speak with people outside the family.”

Wang Yong glanced up at him and then rubbed his nose.

“We already know.”

Xu Ping’s head snapped up. “You already know?! How?” His handcuffs clanked furiously on the chair. “Did you interrogate him? He’s stupid! He doesn’t know how to say anything! Did you beat him again?! Did you?!” He started screaming with no restraint.

BANG! Wang Yong slapped his hand down on the table, sending the tea cup lid tumbling to the ground.

“Sit down! Where do you think you are?! Think you can just scream and shout whenever you want? Do you know what you’re in for right now? Sit your ass down!”

Panting with his head drooping, Xu Ping stumbled back into his seat.

“What do you mean we beat him again?! Would the People’s Police beat the people?” He rapped the table with his knuckles. “Do you remember what the Party and the country taught you? How can you be so oblivious after so many years of school? We have rules and protocols that we follow. We consider the situation from the people’s perspective. We serve the people! We would never hit anybody without reason.”

Xu Ping hid his face in his hands and began to shake.

“I’m begging you. I want to see my brother. He was hurt badly. I want to see him, please.”

Wang Yong picked up the lid and replaced it on the table.

[56] ‘Zheng yi’ means justice.

“You still haven’t figured out the situation!” He snapped. “Do you know you committed a crime? You and your brother sent our colleague[57] to the hospital, and he’s still in there now! How dare you negotiate with me!”

Xu Ping was trembling so violently he couldn’t speak.

“You lay it out right now. Why did you show up at the square in the middle of the night?!”

“Can I see my brother if I tell you?”

Wang Yong burst out in incredulous laughter. “What the heck is wrong with you, young comrade? You can’t just see your brother ‘cause you want to. This is the police station, a place of law. No one can bypass the laws!”



“My brother’s only fifteen. He’s bad up here, and he’s been bullied all his life because of it. He’s alone in an unfamiliar place, so he won’t say anything even if he’s hungry or tired or in pain. Officer, I mean, Sergeant, I’ll tell you anything. I’m begging you. Let me see my brother. It’s nothing to do with him. It’s all me. It’s all my fault.”

After a short silence, Wang Yong replied, “We’ll arrange for someone to look after him while you start talking. Why did you try to enter the square last night?”

“To see somebody.”

“To see who?”

Xu Ping stayed quiet for a long time.

“…this guy who was my senior in high school.”

“What’s his name?”

“…Huang Fan.”

Wang Yong paused.

“Huang Fan? The Huang Fan from the University of X?”

“I’m not sure if there’s anybody else with the same name, but he does go to that university.”

[57] The original text does not specify if it was one officer or multiple officers.

The man put down his pen and searched through a black briefcase by his feet. He pulled out a piece of paper with a photo printed on it. “Is this him?”

Xu Ping glanced at it and nodded tiredly.

Wang Yong put the paper on the table and after some thought, asked, “Why did you go to see him?”

“I got a call from him saying he wanted to see me.”

“Why did he want to see you all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know. It sounded like he was hurt.”

“…did he tell you that?”

“No, but it sounded like he was in bad shape.”

“Where did you arrange to meet?”

“…we didn’t, but he said he was at the square.”

“If you didn’t, why did you go?”

“He said he wanted to see me; then the call ended.”

Wang Yong eyed him suspiciously. “Why would he want to see you at a time like that? What is your relationship with him?”

Xu Ping paused for a while before answering, “Friends.”

“Friends?” The man smiled. “What kind of friends?”

“…average friends.” Xu Ping paused. “We were both on student council when he was at Railroads No. 1. He was the president and I was a representative. He looked out for me a lot.”

Wang Yong tapped his finger on the table.

“What else did you talk about on the phone?”

“Nothing, just this and that. He kept coughing and paused a lot when he talked, and he suddenly started telling me about his childhood dreams. I thought he…”

“You thought he what?”

“…nothing.”

“What else did he say to you?”

“…that’s basically it.”

Wang Yong leaned back on his chair rubbing his chin.

“What of your parents?”

“My mom passed away. My dad is out of town.”

Standing up, the man ripped out a page from the note pad and pushed the pen to Xu Ping.

“Here. Write down your dad’s employer and contact information.”

“Xu Ping!” A skinny, young officer called from the other side of a small window.

Xu Ping was in the corner hugging his knees. He looked up and stood up holding the wall.

“I’m Xu Ping.”

The officer ordered as he unlocked the metal door. “Come out! Sergeant Wang wants to see you!”

Under the gaze of the other detainees, Xu Ping cautiously stepped out of the room.

The metal door slammed shut behind him.

“This way.” The officer pushed him on the back.

Through the long hall, left down the stairs.

“Hey, *Xiao*-Shen!” They ran straight into a big green cap.

“Sergeant Liu.” The officer stood to attention.

“Where you off to?”

“Sergeant Wang wants to interrogate this fella, so I went to grab him.”

“What did he do?”

“He and his brother were the ones who beat our guys two nights ago.”

The higher-ranking officer eyed Xu Ping.

“Oh, right, *Xiao*-Shen. Your wife just came with your clothes. She’s in our office drinking tea.”

“Really?! Wow, thanks a lot, Sergeant Liu.” The officer behind Xu Ping rejoiced. “I barely have time to sleep these days, let alone go home.”

“It’s a big mess these days, but it’ll be fine again once we restore order.”

The two chatted for a while in the hall.

Looking from the second floor, Xu Ping saw quite a few people in the courtyard below. A few police cars were parked in the front. POLICE was printed on their white doors in blue paint.

“All right. Hurry up and get this guy to Sergeant Wang, or else he’s going to get angry.”

“Oh, boy.”

A long, gloomy hallway.

The dark green doors were numbered in order with white paint – Interrogation Room 1, Interrogation Room 2…

The ground was paved with gritty cement, cold and hard.

“Ahhh!” A scream came from one of the doors, making Xu Ping shiver. He made to slow down and take a look but was immediately pushed from behind.

“What’re you looking at? Hurry up!”

The door to interrogation room number four swung open revealing Wang Yong smoking by the windows with his back to them.

“Sergeant Wang, I’ve brought the guy you wanted.”

“All right.” Wang Yong stubbed his smoke on the window sill. “You can go.”

The door closed quietly.

Wang Yong flipped open a file lying on the table and ordered without glancing up, “Sit!”

Xu Ping slowly lowered himself onto the chair.

“So I heard you caused some trouble in the cells.”

Xu Ping looked up. His face was marked with purplish green bruises.

"…I didn't."

"I was told you were screaming for your brother while rattling the bars, keeping the other criminals up."

Xu Ping lowered his head.

"Where's my brother?"

"I was just about to talk to you about that."

"What happened to my brother?!" Xu Ping was becoming emotional.

"He had a high grade fever two nights ago and was sent to hospital yesterday morning. He could've been sent there earlier, but your brother didn't make a peep about his sickness and just lied there. The other criminals were dead asleep, so he wasn't discovered until the morning shift."

Xu Ping stared at Wang Yong quietly before bursting into tears and grabbing his head.

"I do have good news for you. Your brother isn't of legal age yet and, according to our investigation, is indeed intelligently-challenged. So he won't be held responsible for his role in the event. Your dad can fetch him after he comes and pays the fine."

Xu Ping's sobs had become silent.

After a while, Wang Yong finally continued, "But you're different. You're eighteen and mentally healthy. According to our country's laws, you must be held responsible for all legal consequences of your own actions."

He pulled out a few sheets of paper from the file.

"We went to your school to investigate. Your homeroom teacher had good words for you, said you had exceptional grades and you were a leader for your classmates. It seems like she has high hopes for you, eh?"

Gradually, Xu Ping eased his crying.

“We got into contact with your dad, too. I didn’t expect him to be famous. A movie actor, right? He was in shock when he got our call. Your dad doesn’t have it easy, raising you and your brother by himself. He kept begging us to take care of you, said you’re just a misbehaving kid. I have a kid, too. I understand where he’s coming from.”

Xu Ping wiped his face with his sleeve.

“I have a few questions I want to ask you, and I hope you will cooperate with us. Your parents, teachers and classmates all have high hopes for you. You have a future. You have a life ahead of you. You were just confused by the lies of certain people and made a mistake. I hope you can see that and change for the better. Don’t let the efforts of your parents and your country go to waste.”



Slowly, Xu Ping looked up.

Wang Yong pushed a newspaper towards the boy.

WANTED

Illegal organization, City of X Students’ Autonomous Federation, has been organizing and fostering anti-revolutionary unrest. Seventeen on-the-run leaders and major actors (list of names, descriptions and photos on the back) are hereby declared wanted. Upon receiving this order, please initiate searches, and arrest and notify the Police Department of City of X upon discovery.

List of names:

…

Huang Fan. Male. 20yo. Registry in County of X, Province of X. Mathematics student at U of X. Height approx. 180cm. Sharp chin. Relatively skinny. Monolid, long, narrow eyes.

…

“I’ll just be straight with you here. Where is Huang Fan?”

“I don’t know.”

“You were the last person he wanted to see. How could you not know?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Where did you arrange to meet?”

“I didn’t arrange anything.”

“Think about what I said to you, Xu Ping. Think about your parents, your teachers. Think about your future.”

“I’m telling the truth!”

“Why did he want to see you?”

“…I don’t know.”

“What is your relationship with him?”

“…average friends.”

“Think about it some more.”

“…we…we were classmates. Nothing more.”

“He had lots of classmates and friends. Why did you call you out of all people?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Where is Huang Fan hiding now?”

“I really don’t know!”

Wang Yong fished out another cigarette and lit it. After he took a few puffs, the smoke spread in the air sending out its bitter, acrid smell.

“*I don’t know. I don’t know.* Why are you protecting him so, Xu Ping?”

“You’ve got to believe me, Sergeant Wang. I really don’t know anything. We used to be closer but ever since he went to university, I had to prepare for the entrance exam, and we rarely met again.”

“Does your dad know?”

“…know what?”

Wang Yong rubbed his brow with the smoke between his fingers.

“I’ll just say this, Xu Ping. I’m only being so polite to you because of your dad, so don’t take it for granted. I’ll ask you one more time. What was your arrangement with Huang Fan, who does he know, and where is he hiding now?!”

“I don’t know where he is! He didn’t tell me anything!”

“Don’t know, or won’t tell?”

“What can I tell you when I don’t know anything?!”

“How could you not know given your relationship?”

“…what do you mean?”

Wang Yong laughed.

“Pity that your dad raised a shameless son like you!”

Trembling, Xu Ping glared at him.

“You think you can keep everything hush-hush? Huang Fan’s roommate already informed on you, said you two share a special, improper relationship. You’re a gay, aren’t you, Xu Ping? You won’t say anything because Huang Fan is your…right?”

Xu Ping began gasping for air, hands and feet numb.

“I’ll give you one last chance. You give us the location of Huang Fan’s hideout and atone for your crimes so far. I won’t bust your little gay secret, and you can go home with your dad in a few days. You’ll still be a good student, a good son. You can take part in the entrance exam and have a grand future ahead of you. The country and the people are generous but not unconditionally so. Huang Fan betrayed the people, so we must bring him to justice. You must think carefully about what you choose to do.”

Thirty-three



"*All explosions have a moment of silence*
All deaths have a lingering echo

–Bei Dao, *All*

"All rise."

"The Court calls the Defendant, Xu Ping, to the hearing."

"The Defendant, Xu Ping, during his years at Railroads No.1 Secondary committed acts of homosexual perversion with Huang Fan, a senior student at the same school. Late at night on the fourth of June, 1989, Xu Ping attempted entry of the People's Square against the kind warning of the People's Police while the city was under martial law. The Defendant was well aware that the officers, Zhang Li and co., were performing their legal duties but still engaged in physical conflict with the officers and in the process injured Zhang Li's eye with his fist, causing the brow bone to fracture, later diagnosed by the court physician as a minor injury. Afterwards, the Defendant blatantly covered up for Huang Fan, a core member who initiated the antirevolutionary unrest, hiding Huang Fan's whereabouts and aiding his escape."

"The Court believes the Defendant has violated the criminal code for Offence of Obstructing an Officer in Discharge of Duties,

for he purposely used violence against a federal worker who he knew was performing his duties, rendering the officer unable to fulfil his duties and, after arrest, chose not to disclose the whereabouts of the anti-revolutionary criminal, Huang Fan. The People's Procuratorate of City X finds the Defendant, Xu Ping, guilty of all charges. With regard to the criminal facts, the nature of crime, the details of crime and the dangers posed to the society by the Defendant and in accordance with the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, Article 93, the Court's judgment is as follows:

"The Defendant, Xu Ping, is guilty of Offence of Obstructing an Officer in Discharge of Duties and is sentenced to nine months of incarceration and a five-hundred yuan fine."

"The Court has issued its sentence, and the documents will be delivered to the Defendant within five days. If objections exist, an appeal may be made through the Court or a higher court within ten days of receipt. Twenty-seventh of June, 1989."

Xu Ping was handcuffed sitting on a bench by a window and waiting for the marshals to escort him to the car that would take him to the detention centre.

The sky was a clear azure. The oleanders were tipped with blossoms, their inky green leaves splayed out under the warm sunlight. A tiny dragonfly with translucent wings lined with delicate green lines landed on the other side of the window. The early summer breeze blew past, fluttering its two pairs of wings.

"Xu Ping."

Very slowly he turned toward the voice. His eyes were out of focus, and he bore a stone-cold expression.

"Come over here! Someone's here to see you!"

Xu Ping didn't ask who it was, and he wasn't curious either. Like an old man, he stood up from his seat.

The courthouse floor was made of green marble that was polished to a sparkling finish. From afar it looked like a stretch of water reflecting the scenery outside.

A marshal opened the door to a meeting room and pushed Xu Ping in by himself.

In the corner of the room was a big-screen television, and before the set sat a middle-aged officer in uniform.

Xu Ping stumbled and held the wall to steady himself.

"There you are." Wang Yong pulled out a chair beside his own. "Sit down."

Xu Ping only stared at him.

Wang Yong smiled, not angry at all.

"I have someone I know at the court, so I came to say hi since you are being sentenced today."

Xu Ping continued looking at him coldly.

"I told you I don't know anything, but you wouldn't believe me. Now I'm sentenced to prison, what more do you want?"

Wang Yong fell silent before fishing out a video tape from his bag. He slid it into the VCR and switched on the television.

"Nothing. I'd simply like you to watch this tape."

He turned the screen toward Xu Ping who was standing by the door.

In the beginning it was all buzzing static, but then the picture jumped to a female newscaster speaking in Cantonese. Subtitles appeared at the bottom of the screen in traditional Chinese script:

Student leaders on the run, Huang Fan and…and… arrived in Hong Kong after many obstacles and made a televised announcement.

The clip of the announcement was only ten seconds long – Huang Fan wearing a black suit with a sapphire tie, standing tall on a podium surrounded by cameras and flashing lights, speaking into

dozens of microphones and recorders, his forehead clean and unwounded, his hair short but very tidy.

Xu Ping didn't recognize the man for a long time. He squinted at the screen wondering who this man was.

This news story ended and continued onto international news. Wang Yong turned off the television.

"Huang Fan has escaped to Hong Kong."

Xu Ping felt the oxygen leaving his lungs. He struggled to pull out a chair nearby and tumbled into it.

"The televised announcement was last night. I got news of it this morning."

"Why are you showing me this?! You think I helped cover his escape?!"

"No, on the contrary, now I think you are innocent."

Xu Ping couldn't stop shuddering.

"He knew about your arrest several days ago, and we held our ground to see if he would come back for you on account of your past relationship. But judging from the news we received this morning, he has given up on you."

Xu Ping's lips curved into a smile that was uglier than a snarl.

"You were used, Xu Ping. Huang Fan used you as a smoke bomb to divert our attention on the one hand and find another way to escape on the other. You saw how he was, completely uninjured. Now he's in Hong Kong using his identity to slander our country and government, lying to and attracting many Hong Kong people and making a name for himself." Wang Yong ejected the tape. "The fellow looks nice and quiet, but his head is full of smart and ruthless ideas. You made such a big sacrifice for him, but he could abandon you. He's only twenty years old. I can't imagine what his character he will become in another ten, twenty years."

Xu Ping threw his head back guffawing. Then his laughter got weaker and weaker until he began to bawl.

The officer thought he had touched upon a hurtful topic for Xu Ping, but what the boy actually was thinking was, “Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.”

Wang Yong replaced the tape into his black bag. “You’re still young, and nine months isn’t that long. You’ll be out in no time. You should take the time in the slammer to fix that gay sickness that you have and come out a good man.”

Xu Ping hung his head down in silence.

“Oh right.” The officer took out an envelope from the side pocket of the bag. “Your dad wanted me to pass this on to you.”

Pausing for a second, Xu Ping slowly reached out for it. The marshal opened the door, saying, “Sergeant Wang, the ride is here. We’ll be late if we don’t move now.”

“It’s fine. We’re done here anyway.” He clapped Xu Ping on the back. “Keep it in your pocket and read it in the car.”



The prisoner van was no different from other police vans on the outside. POLICE was printed in blue ink over white paint, and a tri-coloured light perched on the roof. The only two points of difference were that the windows were barred with metal on the inside and that the front and back were separated with the same metal bars.

The chassis was very high, and Xu Ping had a tough time climbing in with his hands cuffed together. The door was then locked by the marshal.

The van rolled into the road and headed northward.

The detention centre was built in the countryside about an hour’s drive from the city. It was so remote that it was said to be close to the Gobi desert. Not a single plant grew in that extreme environment.

Sitting in the vehicle and rocking along for some time, Xu Ping felt the letter burning into him but couldn’t find the courage to open it.

His dad had sat by himself in the courtroom's otherwise empty spectator gallery appearing ancient and exhausted.

His brother did not come. Xu Ping was glad. He couldn't stand the idea of Xu Zheng seeing him in handcuffs. He'd rather die.

Xu Chuan listened to the fifty minute long trial in one position without moving a muscle, not even his facial expression.

Xu Ping was suffering from shame and guilt and didn't hazard even a glance.

However, when the judge read out his verdict regarding his homosexual perversion with Huang Fan, Xu Ping panicked and irrationally looked up at his dad. But Xu Chuan averted his gaze.

He had lost everything. His education, his friendships, his future. Even his dad had abandoned him and felt shame that his son was a gay.

Xu Ping buried his face in his hands and began to laugh desperately. As he laughed, tears dripped from between his fingers.

He removed the envelope from his pocket wanting to rip it to shreds, but in the end he couldn't do it, and the envelope lay wrinkled.

He flattened it on his lap and tore one edge open, sliding out a folded piece of paper.

Too scared to move, he clutched the neat square for a long time before opening it.

On the white paper was only one line etched in crooked writing:

I miss you, Gege. Come back.

Xu Ping stared at that line for a long, long time. Then, as though he were having a heart attack, he grabbed at his own chest and began shrieking at the top of his lungs.

AHHHHHH!

AHHHHHH!

AHHHHHH!

The officer in the passenger seat jumped from the shock and banged on the bars, barking, “What is wrong with you, motherfucker! Shut the fuck up! I said shut up!”

Pressing the paper to his chest, Xu Ping screamed like a madman while his tears flowed freely.

His cries pierced through the car windows and frightened a few tree sparrows by the road, sending them beating their wings, propelling into the clear, azure sky.

The city was far behind him. No more tall buildings. No more livelihood.

The road continued on straight as though toward the end of the world. The blue skies, the white clouds, and below them the tender, green grassland, and even farther beyond that the beige mountains – they rose and fell in gentle waves, an endless streaming line.



Book 3

Thirty-four



"*One* generation passes away, and *another* generation comes; but the earth abides forever.

The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose.

hi The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind wrls about continually, and comes again on its circuit.

All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea *is* not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again.

–Ecclesiastes 1:4-7

2006

"The pregame performance has been declared complete. We will now see the happiest twenty-two people in the world today, eleven from France and eleven from Italy meeting at the Olympiastadion in Berlin, the capital of Germany, for the most exciting final match of the 2006 FIFA World Cup."

Xu Ping turned off the rerun and sat in silence on the couch.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning. The sun was sending its blistering beams down from the sky. The cicadas were chirping away on the trees. Cars drove to and fro on the asphalt that seemed to melt under the rays. The windows in the living room were open, but the curtains were still. Then, as though all this wasn't toasty enough, the distinct sizzling of ingredients hitting boiling oil sounded from upstairs, followed by the crisp metallic clang of the spatula hitting the wok.

Xu Ping was wearing a black suit with a black tie. He sat zoning out on the couch.

The forecast said temperatures might reach as high as thirty-eight degrees and continue to rise in the following two days. This would become the hottest summer that this city had seen in a decade.

The house was becoming old after so many years of residency. The walls were yellowing, and thin cracks sprawled across the ceiling. The maroon paint on the balcony railing was peeling off, and even the furniture seemed duller in colour.

It was filled with shadows of life – the kitchen walls darkened by smoke, the bathroom door handle broken by his brother, the bamboo woven chair sunken down from Xu Ping's weight, the corner on the coffee table blackened by his dad's cigarette smoke.

Click. The bedroom door slowly swung open, and Xu Zheng shuffled out awkwardly in a black suit.

"How is it?" Xu Ping stood up from the couch, asking.

"Really tight." Xu Zheng lifted his arms to show his brother.

Xu Ping flicked the man's taut shoulders. "Did your shoulders get wider again? It should fit. I bought this for you just last year."

He circled to the front and started buttoning the suit jacket. "Good thing your waist didn't get bigger."

Xu Zheng made to take the garment off, but Xu Ping held his hand down.

"You can't take it off."

“It’s uncomfortable.”

Xu Ping slapped his shoulder. “Just don’t lift up your arms. This is the only black suit in the house that will fit you, and there’s no time to go shopping now.”

Xu Zheng pouted.

“Put your head down. I’ll put on your tie.”

Xu Zheng obediently ducked his head down. Xu Ping took out a rolled up black tie and popped up the white shirt’s collar.

“Has work been tough these days?”

His brother took a long time to think but never answered.

Xu Ping didn’t pursue the question.

He took out a pair of polished leather shoes for his brother to wear.

One shoelace was untied, so Xu Ping bent down to tie it and also fix the pants legs while he was at it.

Straightening himself, he took a good look at his brother.

The man’s hair was newly trimmed and stuck up in short and stiff tufts. His brows were thick and his eyes deep-set. His jaw line seemed to have been chiselled with a knife. His shoulders appeared quite wide and his waist and thighs were strong and sturdy, perhaps because of the nature of his job. Usually it didn’t stand out when the man was at home in a worn t-shirt and shorts, but after donning the black suit, the quiet man suddenly had an aura of untamed charisma about him.

Xu Ping stood there, dumb.

“*Gege*, what are you looking at?”

What clashed with the incredibly handsome appearance of his brother was his immature language.

“Nothing.” He rubbed his brother’s hair. “Just thinking how much you look like Dad.”

Like a dog being petted by its owner, Xu Zheng let his eyelids droop. Sweat had formed at his hairline.

“Why are you so sweaty?”

“Hot.”

Xu Ping touched his own forehead to find it drier than a desert.

“I don’t want to wear this,” his brother protested. “Too hot.”

“No. What did I tell you before? You have to bear with it no matter how bad it is. You promised me.”

Xu Zheng wiped the sweat on his neck.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I promised you, *Gege*.”

Xu Ping kept his eyes on him.

“When you get there, sit down on the chair. A lot of people will walk by you, but you don’t have to talk to them. You just have to sit there and not move around. Don’t go to the toilet. Don’t come talk to me. Doesn’t matter how long you’ve been sitting, you can only get up after everybody leaves, do you hear me?”



Hesitantly, Xu Zheng nodded.

Xu Ping rubbed his brother’s cheek and reassured, “Don’t be scared. I’ll be standing at the door, and you’ll see me if you just look up.”

Xu Zheng nodded.

“Now remember what I told you about what we’re doing today?”

Xu Zheng took a second before reciting it like an essay, “Dad is going to travel somewhere far, far away, and we are going to see him off.”

After a long silence, Xu Ping flashed a gentle smile at his brother.

A seventeen-inch black and white photograph hung beneath the black banner reading “Service for Comrade Xu Chuan.” Although he poured his own life into the big screen as an actor, Xu Chuan was not fond of having photographs taken of himself in private.

Xu Ping had to look through an old album that he dug out from a dusty box to find this photograph. It was so old that he couldn’t

recall the details of it. His dad did not appear very happy. The man was sitting by a window showing his profile. His fully greyed hair was combed back neatly, and the creases on his forehead were long and deep, but his lost yet dark gaze was pointed off to somewhere unknown.

The staff at funeral home kindly suggested to Xu Ping that he should switch to a photograph of his father in a happier state. Xu Ping pulled out the album only to find that, of the numerous photographs it held, most were either official promotional images for films or taken on the set with Xu Chuan in various costumes, and thus did not capture the actor in daily life.



Xu Chuan had embodied many characters. He had played generals, beggars, millionaires and slumbags. He looked a hundred times better in those photographs, but none of those were truly him.

"You have my condolences."

Xu Ping bowed robotically to the guests who came to offer their condolences.

In accordance with his dad's wishes prior to passing away, there was neither music nor speeches at his service.

His body lay in the centre of the hall surrounded by flowers. The guests had to sign their names upon arrival and then proceed to walk around the body, take a deep bow, and place the lily provided by the funeral home before the body.

The hall that Xu Ping rented, Song He,[58] was located in the northeastern corner of the funeral home and was not a very large one. The main hall named Long Bai[59] was nearly four times the size of Song He, and a service was being held there too on the same day. It appeared the deceased had been rather important prior to death, as the procession was headed by five Lincoln limousines followed by dozens of luxury brand vehicles and caused a traffic jam at the

[58] 'Song' means pine, and 'he' means crane.
[59] 'Long' means dragon, and 'bai' means cypress.

entrance of the facility. A string of funeral wreathes overflowed the hall into the corridor outside and displayed the names of many high-ranking officials of the municipal committee[60] and municipal government and the names of huge companies and corporations. Twenty monks chanted Buddhist hymns continuously, and professional hostesses were recording the endless river of guests and monetary gifts. The music never stopped but nevertheless could not override the deafening cries of sorrow.

In comparison, Xu Chuan's service was as quiet as a silent film. Every guest arrived quietly, offered their flower quietly and then left quietly. Nobody raised their voice. Nobody burst out in tears. A signature book lay open for family and friends to write down their condolences, but there were many fans who did not wish to leave their name and simply left after bowing to the body.



Xu Ping bowed to every person who came. He had burst out in tears the night he was notified of his dad's death, but somehow he didn't feel any terrible pain at this peaceful funeral service.

His brother sat in a chair in the corner, hands flat on his knees.

Xu Ping walked over and sat down beside him.

"Most of the guests have come. The service will end in about half an hour," he said. "Are you tired?"

His brother didn't reply for a long time. "I can't talk to you," he whispered.

Xu Ping smiled.

He looked up at his dad's photograph on the wall. Looking across the hall, his dad's gaze seemed to pierce through time and space.

Xu Ping looked in the direction of his dad's eyes. Outside the clear glass was the tranquil garden of the funeral home. On the green lawn were southern magnolias in abundance and neatly trimmed

[60] Short for 'Communist Party of China Municipal Committee.'

Chinese roses. The small pebble path was still wet from the automatic sprinkler and sparkled gold under the afternoon sun.

"Just hang on a bit more. I'll take you to the noodle shop after this ends."

Xu Zheng gave a serious nod.

Only a few people remained in the hall. Xu Ping slowly put his head on his brother's shoulder as though he were exhausted.

"From now on it's just the two of us," he whispered.

Xu Zheng looked like he wanted to speak.

"What? What do you want to say?"

Xu Zheng scanned around before asking without moving his lips, "When is Dad coming back from his trip?"

Xu Ping faltered.

He looked down and thought about it. "*Xiao*-Zheng, Dad is–"

"Xu Ping!" Somebody on the far side interrupted him with a wave.

Xu Ping stood up and pressed a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Sit here and don't move."

The person who interrupted him was a reporter from *City of X Evening News* who was sent by the chief editor to report on Xu Chuan's funeral service.

"Let's get a picture," he told Xu Ping.

He was to take the photograph with an actress who had worked with his dad. She was in the limelight now and was escorted by bodyguards, wearing a trusty hat and a pair of sunglasses to block the attention.

Without the accessories her face was beautiful like a piece of art. She took out her powder and brushed up her foundation before turning to the camera with a sorrowful expression. "I'm ready."

The shutter went *snap!*

Thirty-five



"*You can only imagine*
When you are awake
But in your sleep, dreams visit

–Ai Qing, *Dreams*

The report on Xu Chuan's service ultimately surfaced in the entertainment section of *City of X Evening News* under the headline "Actress Guan Jing appeared at Xu Chuan's funeral service, black clothes, no makeup, sorrowful expression." Along with it was a photograph of Guan Jing bowing and offering the flower with tears brimming, and in the corner was a blurry family member, Xu Ping.

Xu Ping was back at work from his bereavement leave the morning he read the article. He had been waking up early because his brother was working a temporary job unloading cargo at a factory starting at six in the morning. He bought a newspaper from a street vendor before entering the small building that was the publishing house. The hallways were quiet, as nobody was at work yet. Xu Ping first took the mop and washcloths from the bathroom and cleaned the place, and then he made a cup of tea for himself and sat down in his chair. He laid out the newspaper and began reading from one end to the next, not even missing the dating advertisements

stuck in the middle. By the time he finished, the office was quite noisy with people.

The morning went by without much excitement. The chief editor Wang Zedong announced a meeting first thing, and they all spent the morning studying red documents and harmonious ideology.[61] The atmosphere lightened up only after boxes of fruit were passed out to everyone.

Most of his comrades in the house were female, and the other male editors had much more experience than he, so the job of transporting these boxes landed on Xu Ping. He and the driver, Wang, carried box after box of apples upstairs. Soaked with sweat, he hadn't even gotten the chance to rest when the telephone on his desk rang.



Wang Zedong was asking for him.

Xu Ping knocked on his door. "You wanted to see me, Chief?"

"Yes." Wang Zedong looked up from his desk. "Sit down."

Wang Zedong was well into his forties and had gained a few pounds. He had a daughter who was heading into senior high and was said to have good grades. His wife was an able woman herself and managed her own company. He truly had the perfect life.

The man took off his glasses and rubbed his brows. "Why did you end your leave so soon? It's only been the first seven days, right?"[62]

"The first seven ended two days ago, but I'd taken a lot of time off work when my dad was sick. I think I've taken more than a few years' worth. Now that his funeral has been dealt with, I thought it was not productive to just stay home, so I came back to work."

"I see. I had a call from my cousin last night. She said my uncle couldn't eat for a few days after attending your dad's funeral."

[61] Red refers to the communist party, and harmonious is the word used by the party instead of censorship.
[62] Every seven days after someone's death a ceremony has to be conducted, and this continues until the seventh ceremony on the forty-ninth day. On the first seventh day, the soul is said to come back and visit their home.

Xu Ping remained silent.

Wang Zedong's uncle was his dad's former colleague, Zhang Jinmin, who had taken care of him in his childhood. He was a fairly well-known scriptwriter in the country and wrote for quite a few television series. With his connections in the media world, he lent a helping hand to Xu Ping in his darkest times and recommended him to his nephew's firm as a typesetter. It was only after many years of hard work that he became an editor.

"But you and my uncle, boy, why did you have to be all mysterious? He didn't even tell me who your dad was when he sent you here, only said an old friend. Now I know, eight years too late."



Xu Ping smiled. "I didn't think I could stay that long. I just thought it would be a temporary job. I'd worked other jobs, but they would fire me before long, so I thought this would be the same, too. So I didn't tell you. Plus, I'd been in prison. It's not something I can proudly share."

Wang Zedong leaned back in his swivel chair and touched his forehead. "You don't say. I don't think much of it now, but if you'd told me you were behind bars 'cause of something like that, I'd have probably rejected you. It was different back then; nobody wanted unnecessary trouble, right?"

Xu Ping just chuckled.

"But my uncle's really something. He looks like an honest guy. Everybody thinks he is, but when the honest guy starts telling lies, then it's really trouble. He didn't even blink when he lied to his own nephew! I know my uncle hates asking for favours through connections, so I kept trying to figure out what you had to do with my uncle to make him do this for you. I kid you not, I even thought you might be my long lost cousin." Wang Zedong then broke out in laughter.

"Mr. Zhang watched me grow up. My dad was always away filming, so I'd go to Mr. Zhang's house for dinner after school. One

time I had a fever, and it was he who sent me to the hospital in the middle of the night. To be honest, he's kind of like a father to me."

"I've heard about that, too. My cousin got sick the same night as you, and my uncle brought you to the hospital first and left my cousin at home. My aunt hasn't let him off the hook since. She was still using that against him in arguments a few years back."

Feeling awkward, Xu Ping nudged his glasses back.

"My uncle said you stopped going to their house except to pay them a visit during the holidays. He really missed you all. See, my aunt's just a little, you know, she doesn't only target you. She made my mom so angry a few times that she cried. My mom wonders why a kind man like my uncle married such a woman, so you shouldn't take it too personally."

"Of course not," Xu Ping laughed. "Ms. He was really good to us. I remember the meals she made for us. I learned how to cook when I got older, so I didn't want to trouble them."

Wang Zedong nodded. "It's good that you say that. My uncle really sees you as half a son, so go visit him when you have time. He's been down since your dad passed away."

Xu Ping nodded.

"I'll go back to work if there's nothing else."

"Hey, there's no rush." Wang Zedong took out a stack of forms from a drawer and explained to Xu Ping as he flipped through it. "You weren't here two weeks ago so you might not have heard. Our firm is going through an appraisal next month. Your information isn't complete."

He pushed a form to Xu Ping. "HR told me to give this to you. Fill it out and give it back to me."

Xu Ping picked it up. It was a questionnaire about background information with a slip for a check-up.

“Is the check-up part of the appraisal?” Xu Ping frowned. “I thought only new employees had to do it.”

“Why so many question? We just have to do what the higher-ups want us to do. It’s paid for, so just see it as a work benefit.”

Not sure how to respond to that, Xu Ping folded the papers in half twice and stuffed them into his jacket pocket.

Wang Zedong began eyeing him with a funny look.

“What?” Xu Ping was a bit disturbed.

Wang Zedong rubbed his bald head. “You know what, Xu Ping, my wife was right after all. You’re just too skinny. If you clean yourself up a bit, you’d be a handsome hunk too!” He leaned his head forward secretively. “Be honest with me. Are you seeing someone?”



After a pause, Xu Ping ultimately shook his head.

“Well, perfect!” Wang Zedong slapped his thigh. “Hear me out. There’s an accountant at my wife’s company who’s one year older than you and divorced two years ago without children. She’s a hard worker and has a gentle personality. She’s good with work in and out of the house and has worked for my wife for many years. She’s honest and trustworthy, a perfect match for you. If you want, I could arrange a meeting for you –”

“No, thanks!” Xu Ping interrupted.

Wang Zedong stopped, puzzled. “What?”

“…I don’t want to think about this now.”

“Why not?” Wang Zedong became anxious. “This is one of the most important things of your life! You’re thirty-five this year. You think you’re still young?”

Xu Ping didn’t reply.

A thought occurred to Wang Zedong, and he whispered, “Is it because she’s older and was married before?”

“No, it’s because I personally don’t planto marry. I have a brother to take care of, and you know his condition. He has

problems with his head and has had to depend on me his whole life. What woman could stand that? I'd rather not cause any trouble for her."

"Well, don't you worry about that." Wang Zedong sighed in relief. "My wife told her about your situation. She's not young either and is divorced. She doesn't ask for much, just a nice, sensitive guy to spend the days with. Your brother has a job, doesn't he? You can't say he totally depends on you."

"I can't," Xu Ping declines firmly.

"Why can't you?!"

"…I cannot get married!"

"What the heck is wrong with you? You got all your hands and feet, a proper job, a decent face. Your dad left you a property. Why can't you get married?!" Wang Zedong was a bit angry now.

Xu Ping couldn't refuse the man harshly anymore, but he finally said after a long time, "I can't have children."

Wang Zedong froze.

"…Both my mom and my brother have mental and cognitive issues. I've consulted doctors and they say it's eighty, ninety percent hereditary. My mom died young, and my brother has been bullied all his life. I don't want to bring my child into this world to suffer."

"I shouldn't be telling you her private matters," Wang Zedong found his words again after some time and added, "But if having children is your taboo, you can rest assured. This woman I'm talking about, well, she can't have children, either. Her ex was a rich guy, but he always beat her. She was pregnant once, but her ex came home drunk from a business dinner and started beating her. She lost the baby and could never get pregnant afterwards regardless of what methods she tried. She's a pretty girl, and her ex didn't want a divorce, but her mother-in-law wanted a grandson and forced the divorce to happen. She's doing well financially and doesn't lack

anything in her life, just a sensitive guy to spend the rest of her life with. She hasn't taken a liking to any guy she's looked at so far, but when my wife told her about you, how you're a good son and you're taking care of your brother, that you're righteous and hard-working, she consented. If you two get together, she would've found a good man, and you would've found a wife to share some of the burdens, and neither of you want children. It's perfect!"

Xu Ping stayed quiet for a long time before shaking his head. "No."



Wang Zedong was furious now. He slapped the desk. "I spend all this time persuading you, and you just go 'no' and that's it?! Why 'no'? Tell me!"

"…I don't want to."

"But you haven't even seen her."

"My dad just went to rest. It's too early for this…"

"Who said you have to see her now? I'm just letting you know now. We can talk about it after the fourth seven."

"I don't –"

Wang Zedong stopped him with his hand. "No more excuses. This has been settled. You'll be thanking me in the future. Now, back to work."

Thirty-six

"*Love is life in its fulness like the cup with its wine.*

–Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*



Ding-a-ling-ling!

Xu Ping stopped in front of a shop to let the old man cycle past him.

The street was very narrow, and only bicycles and motorcycles went through here. Small shops lined either side of it: a grocery store, a hardware shop, a beef noodle shop. Located in the old part of town, the grey brick storefronts were worn down. The tall concrete electricity poles wove cobwebs in the sky, and tree sparrows danced on the wires. At the very end of the street was the last *pailou*[63] in the city that had not been demolished, and its black curved roof flew towards the baby blue sky.

With his briefcase in hand, Xu Ping continued forth, turned left before the sign, "Car Repairs Tire Replacement Air Pump," and lifted up the elastic curtain to enter a tiny watch repair shop.

Inside the dim shop, there was a desk by the window facing the alleyway piled full of scissors, crystal lifts, microscopes and other miscellaneous tools. The air was filled with the smell of old furniture and chive and pork stir fry from lunch.

[63] Pailou are traditional archways or gateways. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paifang

His brother was looming over the desk focused on something under a black single-lens microscope.

An elderly man with grey hair sitting behind the counter looked up from his newspaper.

"Oh, it's you, Xu Ping."

Xu Ping nodded smilingly. "Feng-*shifu*."[64]

The old man folded up the paper and stood up. "I'll get him."

"No, no." Xu Ping halted him. "I'm in no rush. I'll just wait for him to finish."

He placed his briefcase on the counter and found a chair for himself.

"How was business today?"

"It was slow in the morning. Just one client who needed his hanging clock fixed. Your brother wasn't here. It became busy in the afternoon, all for watches. A young girl came with an old quartz. My eyes are failing me these days, so I asked your brother to fix it."

Xu Ping looked over at his brother's back bent over the desk. "Is he…any good?"

Feng-*shifu* started chuckling. "You're still so doubtful of him after he's worked here for so long. The only reason I give him the work is because I trust his ability. Plus, the girl didn't come to see li'l old me."

Xu Ping paused and forced a smile.

"What a handsome lad he is. I get business just from him sitting there at the window." Feng-*shifu* lifted the lid of his tea cup and took a leisurely sip. "There was a girl last time, oh, a very pretty girl. She came to my shop every day for two whole weeks, but your brother didn't make a peep, and the girl left in tears."

Xu Ping asked apologetically, "Didn't you explain it to her?"

[64] Shifu 師傅 is a suffix for someone with a particular skill and is a homonym of *shifu* 師父 which is a suffix for someone who is the master or teacher of the speaker.

“But I did. I knew something was wrong the second time she came, and I told her to stop trying, but she wouldn’t believe me. Why would he bother with her when this fellow doesn’t even bother with me?”

“Didn’t you tell her that my brother…has issues?”

“Now why would I tell her that?! Plus, I don’t think he has any intelligence issues. Sure, he just doesn’t like to talk, but he’s gifted in mechanics. There are so many different kinds of people in this world, and if you don’t have a problem or two, then I reckon you’re not human.”

Xu Ping laughed.

“You’re really open-minded, Feng-*shifu*.”

“Well, you learn to be when you’re as old as me. You know what, our kind is dying out. All the young folks are using the whatchamacallit, ‘cell phones,’ nowadays. Nobody’s wearing watches anymore. Your brother wouldn’t need to do manual labour in the morning if this was years ago. He’d earn enough for all his living expenses just fixing watches here.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble he’s caused.”

“At first I thought he was trouble, too. When your dad tried to send the boy to me, I thought, what could I do to help a retard? No deal. But your dad, boy was he smart. He spotted the photograph of the actress, Wang Xiaotang, that I kept under the glass on my desk, and without saying anything about it, he insisted on buying me dinner. Then I show up, and who do I find? Wang Xiaotang in the flesh! In my giddiness I said yes to your dad. I went home that night, and the reality hit me, and I regretted it so much, but after two weeks with your brother, I found that your brother was truly meant for this job. It’s a pity that the watch repair business isn’t doing well. And your dad too…” He heaved a deep sigh.

The twin bell alarm clocks and hanging clocks went *tick-tock-tick-tock*, and a motorcycle and its young driver rode past the window.

SCREECH. Xu Zheng stood up from his chair and after a pause called out, "*Gege*."

Xu Ping looked up at him. The light was behind him, so he could see only the man's large silhouette and nothing of his expression.

"All fixed?" Feng-*shifu* asked, walking over.

Instead of answering, Xu Zheng strode straight to his brother for a tight hug.



Feng-*shifu* put on his reading glasses and inspected his work. "All right. You did a good job. Now go home with your brother. Look at you, all clingy just after a few hours away from your brother."

Xu Ping wasn't sure whether to take that as a good or bad thing. He pushed his brother.

But the stubborn Xu Zheng wouldn't let go.

Xu Ping grabbed his briefcase and his brother's hand. "Okay, Feng-*shifu*, we'll be on our way."

"Go, go, go. You don't deserve that handsome face if you pretend your *shifu* is invisible and then turn into a big slobbering puppy when you see your brother. Just get outta here!" Feng-*shifu* sighed with his hands clasped behind his back.

Xu Ping gave a hearty laugh.

Xu Zheng stopped at the entrance of the building with two large baskets full of groceries.

Xu Ping managed to shift the weighty bag in his right hand to his left and searched for the mailbox key.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, you have your key, right? You go up first. I need to check the mail."

Xu Zheng looked at his brother for a moment before snatching the bags out of his hand and climbing up the stairs.

There was a bunch of colourful ads in the mailbox – real estate, supermarket discounts, an old veteran's formula for psoriasis – Xu Ping rummaged through them, crumpled them up and tossed them into the trash can on the side.

There was one letter stuck to the bottom that Xu Ping had to pull very hard to free up. The edges were worn, and it was smeared with dust.

The envelope was made from very thick paper. The words "Mister Xu" were the only things written on it.

Xu Ping tore open one side of the envelope as he slowly went up the stairs.

The only thing inside was an oil painting the size of a postcard. The paper had turned yellow. In the middle was a preaching Jesus Christ, and a woman knelt at his feet kissing his robe. The detailed brush brought the characters to life.

There was nothing on the back.

Xu Ping looked over the envelope again and found English on the stamps – New York.

Thinking it was from a fan of his dad's, he placed it on the shoe rack after he unlocked the front door.

He made ribs, bean sprout stirfry and winter melon sea snail soup.

His brother's work at the factory was very tough, so every day he would wolf down his dinner so fast that sweat dripped down his forehead and formed a dark U shape on his shirt.

Xu Ping, on the other hand, lost his appetite after a few bites. Perhaps it was the continuously rising heat, but he ate less and less and had a terrible appetite.

He instead used his chopsticks to put more food into his brother's bowl.

“Don’t just eat the rice. Have some veggies, and don’t forget the ribs.”

Xu Zheng looked up at his brother for a while and then copied Xu Ping, putting a piece of the ribs in Xu Ping’s bowl.

“*Gege* is skinny, so *Gege* eat more.”

Xu Ping flashed a warm smile.

During the six months that Xu Chuan fell ill and passed away, Xu Ping lost weight at a surprisingly fast rate. He was troubled by the many things weighing on him, and that greatly affected his appetite and sleeping.

He took a bite out of the rib and only found it to be greasy. He saw his brother going at his ribs with great enthusiasm and didn’t want to ruin the moment, so he forced the meat down his throat. But then he found there was nowhere to put the bone.

He found yesterday’s newspaper lying on the coffee table, so he folded it up and laid it on the dinner table.

The page facing up contained an article on a highly publicized financing case.

“The Aidilun Company has gained the favour of Wall Street investors. GDK bought 0.24 billion of Aidilun stock at 1.8 billion Hong Kong dollars, and stock prices spiked 500% in one month showing its favourable situation. The electrical automobiles developed by the company are projected to go to market within the year.”

There was also a photograph of the company’s representative and the investing party shaking hands before their signed agreement.

Pfft. Xu Zheng spat a bone out right onto the two men’s faces. He wiped the sweat on his forehead with his arm.

“Is it really that hot?”

Xu Zheng nodded.

Xu Ping got up and turned on the air conditioning.

The living room was dark. The television was on, but the volume was very low, playing a historical drama from a few years ago.

A myriad of coloured lights flowed over Xu Ping's face like water. He was lying on the couch before the television, apparently asleep with a magazine in hand.

One of the bedroom doors swung open, and out stalked Xu Zheng.

He stood beside Xu Ping, his shadow swallowing Xu Ping whole.

He slowly crouched down, his clothes rustling quietly.

Xu Ping seemed anxious even in his sleep, his eyes tightly shut and his brows slightly furrowed.

Xu Zheng leaned in closer, so close that their noses almost touched. His breath brushed past his brother's face, and he could count his brother's eyelashes.

He paused in confusion, uncertain of what to do next.

As he stared fixedly at Xu Ping, he reached out tentatively to touch his face.

Slap! The magazine slipped out of Xu Ping's hand and hit the ground.

Xu Ping jerked awake and saw his brother barely a hair's breadth away. His pupils shrunk in an instant, and his fists balled together, his body tense. But the next moment, he relaxed after realizing the situation.

He pushed his brother away and sat up straight. Then, he rubbed his eyes with his index finger and thumb before rubbing his entire face. "What time is it?"

Xu Zheng turned to the clock on the wall and answered after a long time, "Ten twenty-seven."

"I wanted to watch TV for a bit. How did I fall asleep?" Xu Ping muttered to himself.

He picked up the magazine and placed it back on the short shelf beside the couch.

"*Gege* is tired."

Xu Ping shot a look of surprise at Xu Zheng and then smiled. "Yeah, even you could tell."

He turned off the television and massaged his stiff neck. "It's late, and you have to get up early tomorrow. Go to bed."

He rested a hand on his brother's back and accompanied him to his room.



His brother's room was filled with strange and interesting things – various alarm clock models, robots of different sizes, radios from various eras – and in the middle was a desk piled with stuff. The desk lamp was still on, and it was apparent that his brother had been working on something. Sawdust and balls of paper were all over the desk.

Seeing this mess, Xu Ping frowned.

He stepped in wanting to clean out the garbage, but Xu Zheng hurriedly blocked his way.

"What's the secret? Are you keeping something from me?"

Xu Ping leaned his head to the side.

His brother opened his arms in an attempt to block his vision.

Then Xu Ping smiled. "All right. I don't know what's gotten you so secretive, but I won't look." He turned around. "I'm going to count to five. Hurry and hide whatever it is."

He began to count. He heard his brother stuffing things into whatever place he could find. He slowed down on purpose and didn't say five until the noises stopped.

Xu Ping eyed the desk drawer after he turned around, and Xu Zheng quickly stepped in between them.

"Okay. Go to sleep."

He watched his brother take off his t-shirt and shorts and then turned off the desk lamp.

Instantaneously, the room became nearly pitch black save for the sliver of light from the hallway.

He walked to the bed and touched Xu Zheng's face.

They looked into each other's eyes in the dark. Xu Zheng stared fixedly at his brother, his heart beating very fast.

Xu Ping slowly bent over, stopped, and in the end planted a light kiss on his forehead.



Thirty-seven

"*If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars.*

–Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*

July came to an end amidst scorching sun and screeching cicadas.

The quadrennial global soccer hype reached its peak at the end of June. During the game between Italy and Australia, Huang Jianxiang[65] howled Grosso's name – "He is not fighting this battle alone! He is not alone!" – then on the fateful day of the tenth of July,[66] Zidane was sent from the field with a red card in the last game of his soccer career, and Italy beat France, six to four, winning the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany.

As if to commemorate the exhilarating game, it rained for the whole day in the city of X, washing away all the dirt and heat. When the sun shone down once again on the lush leaves at the mouth of every street and alley, the crowds dispersed from the bars leaving them in the usual deserted state save for a few strays.

That evening, after taking care of his brother, Xu Ping took a bus straight to a soccer bar on Liu Ying Road[67] without even

[65] Famous sports commentator in China.
[66] I assume this was the local time in China when the game was broadcast, as this game was played on the 9th.
[67] This gave us a hint as to the specific location of this story. Liuying Road is a street in Xuchang, Henan. This would match the name "City of X."

changing his clothes. Pushing open the heavy wooden door, he shivered as he was hit with a blast of air conditioning.

Someone waved at him from the bar. Rubbing his arms, Xu Ping walked over.

"What do you want? Beer?" He Zhi asked with a raised brow while munching on a plate of peanuts.

Xu Ping nodded.

He Zhi ordered two bottles of Tsingtao and waved his hand when the bartender took out glasses. Sitting shoulder to shoulder, the two friends started drinking without any toasts.



"How's it going these days?"

"…same old."

He Zhi glanced over and gave him a comforting pat.

"I couldn't contact you earlier 'cause I was on a mission. Didn't know your dad passed away until I came back."

"Yeah, throat cancer. It was late stage by the time we found out."

He Zhi turned the bottle around in his hand.

Xu Ping was quite for a second too, but he scrunched his nose and said, "At first my dad didn't want the surgery, but the doctor told me not to worry, said the chance of recovery was very high. He studied in Germany and had a lot of experience with the same kind of surgery, and he went on blabbing about some bullshit new technology, so I signed the consent form. They go into the operation room, and the guy comes out in half an hour and tells me the cancer cells had spread and he couldn't remove all of the bad tissues, and I should mark the days now. That son of a bitch…son of a bitch… My dad's condition worsened so much after the surgery. He just fell apart. He was able to walk and talk and eat before, but afterward he couldn't even get up from the bed. They put a hole in his stomach and fed him water and liquid food through that. I can't imagine what he must've gone through 'cause after just two months he…he…"

Xu Ping clenched his hands and teeth so hard he was shaking all over.

"The People's Hospital?"

Xu Ping nodded as he fought with his tears.

He Zhi pulled out the napkin from under the peanut plate and pushed it towards his friend as he fished out a ballpoint pen from his breast pocket.

"What?"

He Zhi also took out a cigarette from his pocket and asked the bartender for an ashtray.

"Write down the name of that bastard."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. Our team follows strict protocol, and we can't do anything too crazy, but motherfuckers like him who use the lives of his patients to earn credentials for himself deserve a good beating to teach him a lesson!"

Jaws clenched, Xu Ping truly wanted to reach for that pen, but he stopped himself in the last moment.

He spoke again only after a few mouthfuls of beer. "So what if you beat him to death? That won't bring my dad back."

The two men sat drinking in silence. The screen up above was playing a live broadcast of a Premier League game. The bartender was wiping glasses in the corner far away from them, scanning the shop every now and then before going back to his work.

"It's been so long since we met, let's not talk about this. What have you been up to?"

"There was a contraband case in Fujian with a lot of parties involved, so they put together a special team with people from all over the country. They banned all phones and outside communication 'cause they didn't want any leaks that would alert the criminals. Then we were sent back after staying under cover for

months and cracking the case. It'll go on TV in a day or two. They arrested a lot of people. All of their heads are coming off."

Xu Ping nodded.

"I'm wiped, but I reckon I'll get a promotion this time." He Zhi took a swig while staring at the screen.

"You little rascal!" Xu Ping chuckled. "I told you so. With your ability and experience, your leader should have promoted you long ago if he had the tiniest amount of judgement." He raised his bottle. "Here, cheers to your promotion to Captain of the CID!"[68]

"Deputy captain…but I hope I will be the real thing soon."

Xu Ping laughed heartily. "A deputy captain is still a captain. Don't be modest with me now!"

The two clinked their bottles and tilted them straight up.

He Zhi made a gesture to the bartender for another round of Tsingtao, but Xu Ping stopped him. "That's enough. I can't hold alcohol well, and I still have to take care of my brother later. I can't drink anymore."

He Zhi clapped him on the shoulder and called, "Ping-*zi*."

Xu Ping paused. He Zhi had not called him by that nickname for many years. Hearing it again made him think of their childhood, and then he realized he and He Zhi had known each other for nearly thirty years.

He sat back on his seat and took a chilled bottle from the bartender. He lifted it up towards He Zhi and took the first drink.

He knew his friend had something to tell him, but he waited patiently without rushing him.

"I visited *Xiao*-Qing's grave a few days ago. I saw her photo, and I realized I had almost forgotten what she looked like. It's only been, what, eight years?"

Xu Ping stayed silent.

[68] Criminal investigation division.

“I swore to myself that I would find the culprit, but after all these years, I still haven’t found the driver, and I’ve only gotten older.”

Chen Qing was He Zhi’s ex-girlfriend who was killed in a car accident right when they had dated for five years and were considering marriage. The driver fled the scene, and Chen Qing died on the way to the hospital.

“If she were alive, my son would be in elementary school.”

Xu Ping drank his beer.

“Sometimes I think living is a shitty deal. Good people never live long, but those bad ones get to keep their jobs and money and freedom.” He Zhi huffed on his cigarette. “Goddamnit, Anthony Wong[69] was right: murderers and arsonists get gold belts while bridge-builders and road-pavers die without a whole corpse.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” Xu Ping chuckled. “There are just a bit more good people in this world. See, the two of us are alive and well.”

He Zhi sniffed. “I’m having a hard time telling if I’m a good person or not. Dealing with those criminals every day, sometimes I feel like I’m becoming one of those disgusting creatures. The police department is filled with bullshit, too. I only feel a bit relaxed when I’m with you.”

“And this is coming from the mouth of a deputy-captain-to-be?”

He Zhi shook his cigarette. “There’s never an end to promotions. There’s always someone above you and then another above that. People like me, we’re no different from the dogs kept by humans.”

Xu Ping shot a look at him. “Then what’s a civilian like me? You can let out steam with me, but you’d better go back to being your deputy captain. Your mom and dad are counting on you to make the ancestors proud.”

[69] Anthony Wong Chau-sang, a Hong Kong actor.

“Make my ancestors proud, yeah right.” He Zhi laughed. “That should be someone like you.”

Xu Ping fell quiet.

“If it wasn’t for that fucking bastard, you wouldn’t have gone to jail. You wouldn’t have gotten a record, and you would’ve gone to university! That fucker! Now he’s having the time of his life with a wanted poster in his name. You went through so much in the slammer –”

“That’s enough.”

The two men sat in silence together.

Then He Zhi slowly put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I had a little too much tonight.”

Xu Ping nodded.

He stood up to pay, but He Zhi grabbed him. “It’s on me.”

Just as He Zhi pulled out his wallet, the bartender came over. “The boss said that it’s on the house for you two gentlemen.”

Puzzled, Xu Ping looked over at his friend.

Without flinching, He Zhi pushed his wallet back into his pocket.

“Tell your boss I said thanks.”

“Mr. Qin said Officer He is always welcome. We have a few other locations. You can use this VIP card whenever you come to our shops.”

He Zhi took a look at the card before stuffing it into his jacket pocket.

The two friends walked out of the bar.

“You know the owner?”

“Never even seen the guy.”

Xu Ping didn’t speak.

“A lot of stuff happens at these places, and they got their own men and their own business. They need favours from us when the shit hits the fan.”

Xu Ping nodded and made to say farewell and take the bus home.

"Ping-*zi*, I'm getting married."

Shocked, Xu Ping swung around.

"What?! Since when did you have a girlfriend?!"

"Not my girlfriend." He paused looking down at his shoe grinding out the cigarette butt. "My brother-in-law introduced us. She's the daughter of the department chief."

Xu Ping stared at his friend.

"When is it?"

"October."

"Remember to send me an invitation."

"Yeah."

The neon lights of the bars flashed and sparkled in the night. The toasty breeze was filled with dust.

A red taxi slowed to a stop beside them. Xu Ping waved to the driver, and the vehicle continued slowly along its way.

In the distance, bus no. 25 was driving towards the stop, full of passengers returning home late.

"My ride's here."

He Zhi nodded.

"Give me a call if there's anything. Don't try to take it on all by yourself."

Xu Ping laughed. "Don't curse me! You do know what you do, right? I'm a law-abiding citizen. If I ever called you for help, then I'd really be in trouble."

He Zhi chuckled along.

Xu Ping dug out his monthly pass and got on the bus while He Zhi stood by the bus stop.

Xu Ping stuck his head out the window. "All right. Hurry home. Don't make your parents wait."

He Zhi nodded but didn't move.

After a moment's consideration, Xu Ping stuck his head out again. "*Da*-Zhi!"

He Zhi looked up.

"It's my birthday in a few days. Come out for dinner!"

Whooosh! The bus drove off. Xu Ping watched his friend wave good bye in the dark night.



Thirty-eight



"*And was it his destined part*
Only one moment in his life
To be close to your heart?

–Ivan Turgenov

"Hello."

The nurse at the registration window glanced up from her computer.

"Um…I'm here for the, uh, check-up." Xu Ping bent down and spoke towards the little opening.

"Which one?"

"Huh?"

"We have three plans, A, B and C. Which one do you want?"

"…what's the difference?"

"Are you here for yourself or did your company send you?" The nurse sounded impatient.

It was an August morning, and the sun was already burning. The hospital lobby was bustling and buzzing with noise. The queues in front of the registration windows were long. The air conditioning was on, but it could not be felt because of the wide open windows and doors.

“Company.”

“Did you eat breakfast?”

“Not yet.”

“Plan B. Go up to the fourth floor after you pay.”

Blood work, urine sample, ENT, eye examination, x-ray.

The last step was a heart and lungs examination. Xu Ping walked into the room with his slip, and a nurse drew the curtains behind him.

Xu Ping took off his shirt. The doctor listened to a few spots on his back with the stethoscope.

“You name is Xu Ping?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, hey. It’s your birthday today.”

Xu Ping smiled as his agreement.

The doctor replaced the stethoscope around her neck.[70] “Your heart and lungs seem fine.” She eyed Xu Ping’s torso. “You’re just too skinny.”

Xu Ping looked down as he buttoned his shirt. “…Work.”

The doctor added a few more scribbles on the slip and stuck on a barcode sticker.

“Work-related stress is a problem for everybody now. Overtime everyday. A lot of young ones die from over-exhaustion. Sure, it’s nice to have money and wealth when you’re alive, but nothing is more important than health. Don’t you agree?”

Xu Ping looked at the slip, front and back.

“You should tell that to the bosses. How could we worker say no when they ask us to work OT?”

The doctor laughed.

[70] The original doesn’t specify the gender so I assigned the doctor to be female as well as the nurses to be female.

“Work is for your boss, but the body is yours. Even if it’s not for you, you should take care of it for your family.”

Xu Ping paused and then smilingly nodded.

“All my exams have been done. What’s this slip for?”

“Take it to the front desk. The nurse will give you a receipt. Come next week with the receipt to get your results.”

The news of He Zhi’s promotion and his marriage to Chief Wei’s daughter broke within a few days, making this nameless officer the new star of the town. Overnight, he made many new friends, many of which he had never met before but who welcomed him as though they were old friends. All of a sudden, his schedule was full of various engagements, gourmet meals, expensive wine and beautiful women.



He Zhi remembered very well that he visited a big company in the city with the then-Captain Wang for an investigation after his recent transfer to the criminal investigation division. He was young then, ambitious and full of naive courage. Mr. Liu welcomed them into his luxurious office. He shook hands with Captain Wang, all smiles. Thinking he would be next, He Zhi held out his own hand, but the businessman turned to talk to Captain Wang as though he had not seen it.

The captain made a gesture for him to wait outside with the secretary. The moment the doors shut, he heard the captain say, “He’s new. Doesn’t know the rules yet.” He Zhi’s face immediately flushed red.

And it was the same Mr. Liu who approached He Zhi to clink glasses at a social gathering that his brother-in-law brought him to, and who told He Zhi at the end of the meal that they should meet more often in the future.

The whole world changed. Except maybe Xu Ping.

He Zhi was about to leave when Wei Ying called. It was Xu Ping's birthday, and the two of them promised to eat lunch.

Wei Ying asked him some trivial questions on the phone. There were always lots of things to deal with when it came to weddings.

He Zhi listened on mindlessly. From their first meeting to the decision to marry, they had only been on seven dates. In between, He Zhi left for four months for the case in Fujian. He had a careless attitude towards the marriage to begin with. Wei Ying was younger than he was. She had a powerful father. She even studied abroad in England. Although she had average looks, there was a whole lineup of suitors for her. He didn't dislike her, but he didn't want to suck up to her, either. He was a man, and deep down inside he didn't want to hurt a woman's self-esteem, so he wanted to wait for Wei Ying to end this engagement herself. This was one reason he signed up for the Fujian mission. But to this day, the two were going to get married, and he still could not figure the woman out.

"Are you listening, He Zhi?"

"…yeah, go on."

"Do you have any plans for lunch? I'm close by your office. How about we get lunch together?"

"I have plans with a friend."

A second of silence. Wei Ying gave a soft laugh. "That's fine. We can go another day."

She didn't sound upset at all.

"I've already arranged the time with the church, and my dad is still rounding up the guest list. And we should go for a wedding photo when you have time." She paused before saying, "Oh, right. I saw an old couple's forty year anniversary photo at the studio the other day, so I was thinking we should get photos of your parents and my parents, too. What do you think?"

He Zhi did not say anything. He was feeling a bit guilty. Wei Ying was handling the wedding all by herself. He didn't help much.

“Aren’t you meeting a friend? You’d better go. I’ll call you later.”

She was about to hang up when He Zhi interrupted her.

“Wei Ying!”

Xu Ping sat in a small restaurant drinking complementary tea. The waitress brought some menus, but he left them on the table without a glance.

It was his birthday today. He was waiting for He Zhi to have lunch with him.



The decor of the shop was not nice, and it was a small place, too. Only a few patrons were in at noontime. The owner’s wife stood behind the register counting money. A waitress wearing a coarse pink uniform leaned against the glass door staring at the endless stream of pedestrians. Restaurants like this probably numbered up in the tens of thousands. They took up space on every street and alley. People passed by them day in and day out, but nobody ever remembered their names.

Once upon a time, Xu Ping often ate at such restaurants with He Zhi. His friend had just graduated from police academy and landed a job of community patrol. After getting out of prison, he had found a job as a typesetter after switching several jobs. Neither of them had much in their wallets. Both of their jobs paid little, especially Xu Ping’s. This kind of restaurant was not the best in taste, but with its cheap prices and large portions it proved to be their best choice.

Their situation now was quite a bit better than before. Xu Ping was not exactly well-off, but He Zhi was definitely not lacking in the financial department. Xu Ping knew his friend was used to eating caviar and escargot, but he could not think of one instance when they had gone to a high-class restaurant for their birthdays.

He had known He Zhi for far too long. From the snot-dripping elementary years to today, almost thirty years had passed. How

many people had friends for thirty years? People became older day by day, pressed harder into the mould that was society. They met new people every day, but they were your colleague, acquaintance, that person up the street, that person next door – they were not your friend.

Xu Ping glanced at his watch. He Zhi was late. Just when he took out his phone to give his friend a call, the glass door swung open. In walked He Zhi, and behind him a young woman in a sapphire blue suit.

Xu Ping was in shock for a second. He Zhi never mentioned that he would bring a plus one – a woman, too – but he soon made sense of it.

He stood up.

"This is my fiancée, Wei Ying." He looked to Wei Ying. "My friend, Xu Ping."

Xu Ping shook hands with her, and the three sat down at the table.

Xu Ping felt awkward, but he hid it very well. He blamed He Zhi for not warning him beforehand, otherwise he would not have chosen such a cheap place as the place to meet the future Mrs. He. But He Zhi didn't look bothered.

He was looking down at the menu.

Wei Ying's suit was of a simple cut, but the cloth was of fine quality. Her person was similar; she had average looks but had a quiet, calm aura about her that made her likeable. She was dressed in a high-class suit and used a high-class leather bag – Xu Ping could clearly see the criss-crossed C's – but she sat on a tattered red plastic chair drinking the free tea, seeming very gentle and down-to-earth.

Xu Ping really wanted to kick his friend in the shin.

It was Wei Ying who spoke first.

“I don’t usually dress like this,” she said with a sweet smile. “I had a meeting this morning with a difficult client. This is my battle garb.”

“What do you do, Ms. Wei?”

“I manage an art gallery for a friend.” She opened her bag and gave Xu Ping a business card.

Xu Ping reached for his pocket but unfortunately found he had not brought his business cards with him. He spread out his hands.

The two broke out laughing.

After the mood lightened, Xu Ping started to chat freely with her about the weather, the news, the art gallery and the publishing house. He Zhi chimed in once or twice but listened most of the time.

The two stopped talking when the food came.

Wei Ying had excellent table manners. It was evident she had a very good upbringing.

Halfway in, He Zhi’s cell phone began ringing. He looked at the two before taking the call outside.

The waitress served a dish of stir-fry choy sum with mushrooms as accompaniment. It smelled delicious.

Wei Ying gave the dish one look before calling the waitress and requesting it be remade without any mushrooms.

He Zhi disliked mushrooms, but not even his mom knew.

Xu Ping looked up in surprise.

“You know he doesn’t like mushrooms?”

“…yeah, I discovered it once when we were eating.”

“How? He isn’t a picky eater.”

Wei Ying giggled as she pointed at her neck. “He has this vein here, and it jumps when he eats mushrooms.”

Xu Ping broke out in guffaws. He had not been this cheerful for a long time. He was still laughing by the time He Zhi came back to the table.

“What’s so funny?” He Zhi sat down.

Xu Ping gave his friend a hard punch on the back.

“We’re talking about your childhood stories.”

He Zhi lifted his brows.

Appearing rather excited, Xu Ping rattled off their stories about their childhood, the trouble making and horsing around.

He Zhi did not know what magic spell Wei Ying had cast on his best friend. Xu Ping wasn’t someone to open up to anybody this quickly.

He sneaked a look at Wei Ying. She was focused on Xu Ping’s speech but felt He Zhi’s eyes. She turned at the slightest angle and looked at him with questioning eyes.

Her nose wasn’t tall. Freckles dotted her cheeks. Her eyebrows were sparse. She was far from meeting the beauty standard, but her eyes were so very bright.

He Zhi felt his heart palpitate for a second, just a quick second, and he turned his face away.

Thirty-nine



"*The dust receives insult and in return offers her flowers.*

–Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*

Nearly none of his colleagues knew Xu Ping's birthday. The only exception was chief editor, Wang Zedong.

He called Xu Ping to his office and gave him a tie as present.

To Xu Ping's surprise, it was a red silk tie with a diagonal pattern. The packaging was exquisite, and the label was written in Italian.

Xu Ping knew Wang Zedong hated bright coloured ties, preferring to wear only blue and black ones himself.

"My wife picked it. Hand-crafted in Italy. The name's long – something 'la' – I can't remember now." He scratched his sparsely thatched scalp. "I wanted her to buy a blue one, but she said red was better. You know my wife. She's ruthless when it comes to shopping, so I just went along with whatever she said. You're young and thin, so maybe this will indeed look good on you."

Xu Ping knew Wang Zedong had "wife-itis."[71] He would back down at the slightest sign of discontent of his wife.

[71] The term for bronchitis is "qì guǎn yán". A new term referring to men who are "infected" with bossy wives is "qī guǎn yán."

With a smile, he brought it up to his torso for show.

"How about we go for dinner tonight?"

Xu Ping shook his head. "You know my brother. I can't be away at night."

Wang Zedong nodded, as he hadn't expected Xu Ping to agree. He had more important matters to address.

"My wife arranged things with Ms. Fang. You'll meet next Friday. We'll find the location for you."

Xu Ping paused. "Who is Ms. Fang?"

Wang Zedong rubbed his palms together. "I told you last time I'd introduce you to the accountant at my wife's company."

Xu Ping pulled a wry smile.

Wang Zedong eyed him. "Do you have a good suit? I can find one for you if you don't."

"I do." Xu Ping nodded.

"Then it's settled. You go clean yourself up. Get a haircut. Polish your leather shoes. Give the lady a good first impression."

Xu Ping didn't bother to argue back anymore.

Wang Zedong raised the tie box up to Xu Ping's torso and said contently, "And just wear this tie. My wife does have a good eye. You have fair skin, and the black suit would look great with this tie."

Xu Ping was late picking up his brother.

Feng-*shifu* called Xu Ping before he left work and said he had some urgent matters to deal with and had to leave early. He would leave Xu Zheng with the bicycle shop next door.

Similar things had happened before, so Xu Ping was not too concerned.

He left the publishing house right on time. Most of his colleagues were middle-aged women who chit-chatted about their husbands and children, and Xu Ping didn't share anything in common with that. Few people ever invited him for any activites

after work. Not that Xu Ping minded. His life was very simple. The repetitive nature might seem boring to a lot of people, but Xu Ping found within the monotony a sense of stability, and that stability made him content.

The sky was gloomy when he boarded the bus. The pale grey lead colour pressed downward. Dragonflies scurried close to the ground in chaotic circles. The bus was stuffed with commuters returning home, and the humid air was saturated with sweat and dirt.

The city was becoming bigger and bigger, more and more tightly-packed. The workers abandoned their farmland and surged into the cities looking for a life for themselves. New buildings were underway everywhere; yellow crane signs were around every corner.



Whoosh! The bus stopped at a stop. The person behind Xu Ping stood up from his seat and left the vehicle, and a boy wearing a senior high school uniform tried to squeeze into the empty seat. Xu Ping discreetly blocked his way, and a dried up old man holding a bag took it. The tall boy glared at Xu Ping and cursed under his breath, “Fuck!”

Just then, lightning struck across the sky. Then one or two seconds later, a boom of thunder seemed to resonate through the earth.

Rain started to come down in buckets.

The bus driver stepped on the brakes throwing all the passengers forward.

The driver stuck his head out into the rain.

There seemed to be a huge traffic jam that congested this side of the street. No vehicles could move for some time.

The impatient driver shut off the engine and hopped off to investigate.

Soon, he came back dripping wet. Wiping his face, he announced, “There’s an accident up ahead. A worker was killed by a car. There’s blood everywhere.”

After a moment of silence, the entire bus burst with clamour and discussion. Many passengers stuck their heads out to look.

They couldn't see anything through the storm and mist.

The sound of an ambulance siren was approaching. A police car and ambulance then drove up on the other side of the road against the natural flow of traffic.

Xu Ping grabbed on tightly the handle above his head. Goose bumps appeared all over his arms.



Holding his briefcase over his head, Xu Ping dashed from the bus stop to the watch repair shop.

It was raining so hard that Xu Ping's back hurt from the fat droplets hitting him.

The rain gathered in small muddy puddles. His leather shoes sent brown water splashing into the air.

There were few pedestrians, and most of the shops had pulled down their metal shutters. The water dripped down from the roof edge in one continuous column and became streams flowing around the steps towards lower ground. The pagoda trees[72] on either side of the street swayed and swooshed in the storm.

His brother was standing in front of the repair shop holding a small sheet of clear plastic as shelter from the rain. His clothes clung to him, completely soaked.

Briefcase on his head, Xu Ping stopped before him.

"Why are you all alone?"

"Everybody left," Xu Zheng answered.

The shutter of the bicycle repair shop was drawn down. Even the sign that usually hung outside had been taken down.

[72] The character for this tree is 槐 (wood radical + ghost radical). It is believed that demons and ghosts are drawn to these trees, thus this tree is inauspicious and is not used to make furniture or housing.

Xu Ping looked at his brother holding the piece of plastic up with two hands. The man looked like he had just climbed out of a swimming pool; even his hair was wet.

"No one gave you an umbrella?"

Xu Zheng shook his head.

For a second, Xu Ping felt furious that his brother was abandoned by the door like a stray dog without even a place to hide from the rain! But the anger was soon replaced by sorrow.

He touched his brother's hands. They were very cold.

"We're going home right now." He pulled his brother along.

Xu Zheng moved the plastic sheet over Xu Ping's head.

Xu Ping turned around. Most of his brother's body was directly exposed to the elements, and he could barely keep his eyes open in the rain.

Xu Ping looked at his brother, unable to speak a single syllable.

The wind blew a corner of the sheet up, letting in the rain. Xu Zheng hurriedly pressed it back down.

Xu Ping grabbed his hand.

He yanked the plastic out of his brother's hand throwing it aside. The wind soon took hold of it and whipped it far away.

They now both stood in the rain. Xu Zheng looked back at him dumbly.

He flashed a smile.

A taxi came from the other side of the street. Xu Ping reached out his hand.

Although Xu Ping had planned to celebrate his birthday by dining out with Xu Zheng, it was all ruined by the storm.

They both were completely soaked. The taxi driver had mumbled the whole way, complaining about how they made his car all wet.

Other than the house that Xu Chuan left to his sons, there was less than two hundred thousand yuan in his bank account. He had planned to leave behind a larger estate, but his illness had taken more than half of his savings. Xu Ping's salary was not very high, and he had to care for his brother, so he was extremely wise with money. He would never take a taxi to go to or from work.

The sun had set when they arrived home, but the rain had not ceased.

He ushered his brother into the bathroom for a hot bath while he changed out of his clothes and made dinner.



Dinner was light – tofu, green vegetables and seaweed eggwhite soup – there wasn't any meat because Xu Ping didn't even have time to buy it.[73]

Thunder was still rumbling outside. The television was not turned on.

Xu Ping noticed that his brother was sneaking glances at him, but when he looked up, Xu Zheng would be looking elsewhere.

He placed a piece of tofu in Xu Zheng's bowl.

Xu Zheng buried his head in his bowl eating.

Xu Ping chuckled. "Do you know what today is?"

Xu Zheng lifted his head up slowly.

"It's my birthday. I'm thirty five."

No cake. No candles. Xu Zheng looked down and gave a nod.

Xu Ping got up and cleaned up his bowl and chopsticks. He ate less and more quickly than his brother. He rubbed Xu Zheng's head when he passed by.

His brother's mind was wandering off somewhere the whole night. Glancing at the clock on the wall every now and then with an

[73] Unlike the supermarket system for meat, meat is predominately sold directly from butchers in China because Chinese cuisine places heavy emphasis on freshness.

excited yet anxious look, Xu Zheng seemed like a middle school boy about to go on his first date.

Xu Ping saw it all but didn't point it out.

It wasn't even ten o'clock yet when Xu Ping started yawning.

His brother was still watching television.

He stood up and made to say good night, but Xu Zheng grabbed him.

"Aren't you tired?" Xu Ping bent down and asked softly. "I want to go to bed."

Xu Zheng held on to his brother's wrist somewhat tightly. "Watch TV with me, *Gege*."

Xu Ping looked at his face for a while before finally sitting down.

The local channel would always play foreign artistic movies at ten o'clock on Friday nights. Whether it was Italy or France, or an ancient town with blooming flowers, they were all places many never even dreamt of visiting. The sorrow and joy, the love and hate, the long, panning shots, the slow music, the mysterious and elegant tongue, all of this was like a lullaby to Xu Ping.

Xu Zheng laid his brother's head onto his lap.

For a split second, Xu Ping's eyes fluttered open. He caught that familiar scent and the warm hand stroking his neck, the coarse fingers scraping softly along his skin. He felt calm and at peace and fell into a deep slumber.

Xu Ping was woken up by his brother ten minutes before midnight.

Xu Ping rubbed his eyes. "Is the movie over?"

Xu Zheng shook his head.

"I have a present for *Gege*."

Xu Ping smiled, not surprised at all.

"Where?"

"Close your eyes."

Xu Ping used his tie as a blindfold and let his brother lead the way. He felt the large knuckles on his brother's hands wrapped tightly around his fingers, swerving around the table and chairs. He smiled.

His brother led him into his bedroom and untied the blindfold.

Xu Ping opened his eyes.

On his brother's desk was an oak-coloured clock carved in the shape of a house. In the centre was the round clock face and around it were trees and flowers. To the left of the face was a blue bus, and in the background were tall buildings. To the right of the face were two people hand in hand.



Surprised, Xu Ping turned to his brother.

Right then, the window above the face opened, and a white dove flew out and chirped twelve times before music started playing. The wheels on the bus started turning, the sun rose above the buildings and the two people walked from the right to the left and boarded the bus. Then, as quickly as it began, it all returned to the original position.

"You made this?" Xu Ping asked.

Xu Zheng nodded.

He pointed at the two figurines. "*Gege*. Me."

So this was his brother's little secret.

He touched the clock face and slid across to the two tiny people on the side. The faces were hard to make out, and there were still some wood shavings stuck to it. The shorter one had on black suit pants and a white short sleeve shirt. The taller one was wearing a blue tee shirt and jeans.

Xu Ping laughed out loud. He did not tell his brother that it was very inauspicious to give someone a clock as a birthday gift,[74] but he

[74] Because "clock" sounds the exact same as "end," the action "to give a clock" sounds the exact same as the expression "to send someone off (at their funeral)" (lit. to give end).

didn't care. Honestly, this was the best birthday gift he had ever received.

"Thank you. I really like it," Xu Ping said with a smile.

Xu Zheng solemnly placed the clock in his brother's arms.

"I have another present," he whispered.

Now Xu Ping was caught off guard.

His brother appeared nervous.

"Close your eyes."

Xu Ping did so but didn't hear a sound for a long time.

He took a curious peek.

"You lied, *Gege*!" Xu Zheng yelped.

Xu Ping giggled. "Fine, fine, fine. I'm sorry. I'll close my eyes now."

But his brother didn't trust him and blindfolded him again with the tie from before.

Xu Ping stood waiting in the darkness. The clock was not light by any means, and his arms soon grew sore from holding the weighty gift.

The darkness gave him strange illusions. He felt as though he was standing naked in a field of snow, and a shapeless person was caressing him lovingly.

It was then that he felt his brother's palm on his face. He could smell his brother. It was a scent that he would not mistake out of a hundred thousand.

He felt his brother caressing the eyes beneath the tie, touching his nose, his cheeks, his ears.

The warmth from his brother seeped through the air to him.

Xu Ping panted shallow breaths.

He tilted his head slightly to the right, unsure if he was trying to avoid or approach.

His pale neck was clean and slender, and the tilt only added a hint of mysterious grace.

"*Xiao*-Zheng," he called quietly.

His brother kissed him.

And time seemed to stop.

In the dark, his senses heightened. The pressure of his brother's lips on his lips. The warm, wet breath. The caresses that seemed to be filled with tenderness. But the temporary joy in the dark seemed all the more transient. Xu Ping thought he might have fallen into some nameless dream as he had on many nights, desiring something he could never obtain.

He lost track of how long his brother had been kissing him. It seemed long and gentle, but it also felt like a string of short, sweet pecks. He succumbed to the sensations and fell into the fantasy, the gap between real and counterfeit.

Only after his brother slowly undid his blindfold did the world return to her original self under the light. The various clocks and watches tick-tocked away steadily. The movie score was playing from the television in the living room.

"*Gege*."

Xu Ping was still Xu Ping. Xu Zheng was still Xu Zheng.

His brother held his face wanting to kiss him again, but Xu Ping stepped back.

He stayed silent with the weighty clock in hand.

"Thank you for the birthday present." He stared at a spot on the wall. "Good night."

Forty



“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

–Matthew 6:25-27

“Xu Ping.”

Wang Zedong shared a look with his wife. She frowned and gestured with her eyes.

“Xu Ping!”

Starting, Xu Ping turned away from the window, his face sickly pale.

He jerked his lips to form a ghost of a smile.

“Sorry. Where were we?”

Wang Zedong had a quick temper, and he wanted to unleash a scolding upon the man whose mind was wandering elsewhere. His wife kicked him under the table.

It was Friday evening again, the sky dim. Outside the restaurant window was a busy road. The city centre was illuminated by the shops and streetlights. There were always people crossing the footbridge above bus after bus packed full of passengers. Farther off were the sparkles beaming from the top of the tall buildings. A smudge of crimson lingered in the navy blue sky. The sun had set, and the moon had risen, but its light was too weak, swallowed by the glaring red and green lights in the bustling city centre at night.

Xu Ping had on an indigo suit, a red silk tie and a pair of frameless, non-prescription glasses. His newly trimmed hair stood up in tiny spikes held up by the stylist's gel. His forehead clean and his body slim, he appeared a lot younger than his age.

"*Xiao*-Fang was asking about your family," Wang Zedong's wife prompted.

"My dad passed away recently, leaving me and my brother," Xu Ping answered.

"You probably know his dad," Wang Zedong added. "He was a long-time actor who worked for August First, and he played He Long and got a Golden Rooster."

The woman sitting across from him smiled. "That I remember. My high school arranged a fieldtrip to the theatre for us to watch it." She turned to Xu Ping. "I wouldn't have thought he was your dad."

Xu Ping didn't reply.

Wearing minimal cosmetics, Fang Guo was dressed in a white short-sleeved silk smock blouse and a dark blue skirt. Her facial features were not fair but gave off an exceptional, wistful air. This was enough to move many men, but apparently that did not include Xu Ping.

The square table was covered with a daisy-white cloth. The dishes had yet to be served, and each person had only a glass of ice water in front. Xu Ping was staring at his glass, mind wandering

elsewhere. His eyes were unfocused, and his expression looked like a mask, muscles frozen stiff.

"Did you attend a local high school, *Xiao*-Fang?" Wang Zedong tried to save the situation.

"I've been here since I was born. I went to No. 3 Secondary."

"The one in the old parts to the west?"

"Yes."

"Wow, then it's quite close to Xu Ping's school. He went to school in the old parts, too. Railroads No. 1, do you know it?"

"I do. It's not far from mine. Our schools are old rivals. Singing competitions or speech contests or whatever it was, we would always go up against each other."

"Hahaha, what a coincidence. I heard he was a very good student, the best in his class. He must have participated in many competitions. You two are around the same age, so maybe you've even met before?"

Wang Zedong received a glare from his wife. "That was so many years ago. Who still remembers their high school days? You'd have trouble with the names of your own classmates, let alone someone from another school. Ask yourself, how long has it been since you last contacted your high school classmates?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with me asking, is there? They might have known each other."

The woman pursed her lips and stared back at him.

Only then did Wang Zedong catch the hint and laugh it off.

Fang Guo noticed the look but chose not to say anything.

Everyone has a skeleton in the closet, so did she.

Meanwhile the waiter was serving the food. Mrs. Wang had picked a rather well-rated Cantonese restaurant in the busy part of town. The waiter brought a steamed grouper on a blue and white china platter, lettuce with oyster sauce, and white boiled shrimp.

Every person received a bowl of white rice the size of a lady's fists along with the complimentary daily soup.

Frowning, Wang Zedong picked up his chopsticks and tapped them on the table.

"Excuse me for saying this, but we Northerners are just more down-to-earth. Our wine glass is bigger than those Guangdong people's rice bowl. I could finish this tiny pathetic bowl of rice in one gulp. Where's the pleasure?!"

His wife couldn't help roasting him. "Stop it right there, you tasteless oaf! You think this is the 80s?! Rice isn't the principle food anymore, it's the other dishes! Look at your own belly. You're not young anymore, so you should eat less, eat blander foods. Don't collect a bunch of problems for later!"



The man was about to retort when Xu Ping interrupted.

He threw down his serviette and stood up from his seat.

"I need to use to men's room."

"*Bleeeech*."

Having eaten little the entire day, all he could puke up was clear fluid regardless of how sick he felt.

One hand on the wall for support, Xu Ping pushed down on the toilet lever.

While the water flushed, he unlatched the stall door and walked out.

He heard the energetic hum of noise coming from the dining area outside the door, merry and distant.

He stumbled toward the sink, took off his glasses and placed them on the counter before turning on the tap to wash his face.

The water hit the bottom of the white porcelain, splashing tiny droplets.

He cupped his hands and threw some water onto his face.

The water wetted his collar. He undid the top button and ripped the tie loose.

In the mirror was the reflection of a pale man. Bony face. Sickly grey lips.

Holding on to the counter, Xu Ping stared at himself panting, and the next moment he ducked down to rinse out his mouth.

The toilet in another stall started flushing, and a man walked out to wash his hands. He flashed a strange glance towards Xu Ping before leaving.

In that instant, the buzzing amplified before falling to a barely audible murmur after the door closed.

Xu Ping pulled out a good length of toilet paper from a stall to roughly dab at his face before throwing the wet ball into the trash can.

He stepped toward the door but then came back around, jerked the tie from his neck, rolled it up and dumped it.

He left the restroom.

Wang Zedong, his wife and Fang Guo were still chatting in a corner by the window about some subject. Fang Guo was smiling, hiding all the shadows of her past.

Xu Ping secretly observed them for a bit before walking in the opposite direction out of the restaurant.

The clerk at the front quickly glanced at him before returning to her work.[75]

A blast of roasting air hit him the moment he pushed open the door.

The streets outside was filled with a different kind of noise: cars, buses and motorcycles driving to and fro, the lights turning red, green and yellow, street vendors selling t-shirts with strange prints, a sweaty Uyghur man with a curly beard fanning mutton skewers

[75] The gender is not specified, but I designated the person to be female.

roasting over coals, a young woman hollering on a loudspeaker in front of an apparel shop about an insane sale. This city was invigorated with various forces.

Xu Ping stood in the dimming street for a while. The orange light from the Cantonese restaurant glowed through the glass door behind him making his expression a bit blurry.

He took off his suit jacket and held it.

He wasn't sure where he should go. The streets to the left looked exactly the same to him as the streets to the right.

He looked up and saw only a slice of the moon. The environmental and light pollution had concealed all the stars. He recalled the Milky Way he used to see on midsummer nights in his childhood, and he had forgotten how long ago that was.

At the corner diagonally across from him was the orange, green and red logo of a 7-Eleven convenience store.

He took a step forward, ready to cross the road.

Xu Ping bought six cans of beer and some other things. The cashier took a look at him and asked if he wanted a bag. He shook his head.

As he walked past the automatic door of 7-Eleven, his cell phone began ringing in his pocket.

Caller ID displayed the name, Wang Zedong.

He looked at the device for a second before pressing the answer button.

Wang Zedong's voice exploded like a volcanic eruption.

"Where the hell are you, Xu Ping?! A twenty-minute bathroom break? What do you expect me to say to the lady?!"

Xu Ping sniffed.

A taxi driver was trying to pick up a fare in the middle of the street, stopping traffic, and the drivers behind the taxi started honking their horns.

Wang Zedong caught on.

“Where are you right now?!”

Xu Ping thought about his answer. “Outside.”

“Outside?!” Wang Zedong’s voice jumped an octave. “What the fuck are you doing outside?! Don’t you know you have a blind date?! Get back here right now!”

Xu Ping replied calmly, “I’m not going back.”

Wang Zedong faltered for a moment but soon burst out in a vicious rant, “The fuck are you smoking! You–”

Xu Ping hung up without hesitation.

He stuffed his phone back into his pants pocket. Snapping one can free, he popped it open and tilted his head back drinking as he strolled along the street.

The phone rang for a long time, but he didn’t pick it up.

He could picture Wang Zedong so angry that his face was red and he was jumping. Rather than worrying, he started laughing.

He thought he had walked quite far, but he had not even left the city centre. He could see the giant signs of a department store nearby.

He had drunk more than half the beer, filling his stomach with a lot of fluid, and the sick feeling had crept back.

He held on to a tree and started barfing.

Many people passed by him with looks of disgust.

He slowly straightened himself and wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve.

It was nine-thirty in the evening, and the streets were still lively with pedestrians. On Friday nights, many came out to shop. Young couples went to bar or went on dates to the movie theatre.

Staggering with his head down, Xu Ping accidentally bumped into the shoulder of a man in black t-shirt.

The man stopped and eyed Xu Ping with a menacing look.

Xu Ping straightened up and looked back emotionlessly.

It was the girlfriend who spoke first. “Let it go. He’s drunk. Don’t bother with a drunkard. Let’s go.” She hooked an arm around that of her boyfriend.

The man still gave Xu Ping a mean glare before swinging an arm around the woman and leaving.

Only after they both disappeared around the corner did Xu Ping wobble along his way.

He thought his head was very clear, but his steps were anything but straight.

At the intersection before a department store, he turned and shuffled his way up the footbridge.

A blonde Charlize Theron had half her boobs showing on a billboard. Her golden silk dress rippled like water. She held a slender, gold perfume bottle, and beside it were the English words, “j’adore Dior.”[76]

Her face seemed familiar to Xu Ping, but he couldn’t recall in which film he had seen her.

He hung over the railings looking down at the road lit by the streetlights and shop illumination. It extended straight forward, and various types of automobiles whooshed by under the bridge. The traffic lights in the distance kept changing colours as though they formed some sort of secret code.

The stuffy, hot breeze brushed his face.

In the middle of the footbridge was an old, grey-bearded man seated on a mazha,[77] wearing a traditional long tunic and playing the erhu.[78] His voice was low and scratchy. There was a chipped white porcelain bowl in front of him, and beside it were a few lines written in white chalk.

[76] This is not a mistake in translation.
[77] A traditional folding stool.
[78] A two stringed bowed instrument played by various ethnic groups in China.

Xu Ping suddenly felt dizzy, his ears started ringing and his legs felt weak. Unable to stand, he collapsed onto the bridge while holding the railing.

The phone rang in his pocket for two hours before finally returning to peace.

He grabbed another can of beer, opened it and began drinking.

For the first time he found what drinking beer on a footbridge looked like – bustling yet distant. The stream of cars flowed beneath him in a silver river.

Many walked past him, but none paid him even a glance. They thought he was a beggar.

He was hit with a pang of fear. He felt miniscule, like a grain of sand. Countless people walked to and fro, none of whom he recognized or recognized him. Nobody would notice even if he were to die in that very moment.

An empty can tumbled and rolled between the cracks in the railing and bounced a few times on the pavement below before being flattened by a truck into a thin piece of aluminum.

With shaking hands he clung to the railing and began sobbing.

Forty-one



“Come to Me, all *you* who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light.

–Matthew 11:28-30

Earlier in the week before the blind date, Xu Ping realized he had made a mistake.

He had placed the clock that his brother gave him beside the desk lamp in his bedroom. At times when he was reviewing drafts under the lamplight, he would see the wood sculptures and feel happiness.

He thought the birthday present was very sweet and precious. Had he not been a light sleeper who would be bothered by the ticking of the hands, he might even have put it on his bedside table.

For three consecutive nights, he was awakened by the chirping pigeon and music at twelve o’clock midnight and could not fall asleep until after two hours of tossing and turning.

He bore with it without complaint until Tuesday morning when he mentioned it nonchalantly at the dining table, “What happens if the clock breaks?”

“I can fix,” Xu Zheng answered while eating congee.

“Can you also change the time that the pigeon comes out?”

His brother nodded.

“Very tricky. I can change.”

Xu Ping let out a breath of relief. He carefully took the clock in his arms and placed it on the coffee table.

“If you have time after work, could you change the time to six o’clock?”

Xu Zheng looked at his brother for a while and then nodded.



Noontime on Tuesday, a few of the higher-ups went out of town for a meeting, so the atmosphere in the office was very relaxed. Xu Ping let a few colleagues know before leaving for the hospital to pick up the check-up results.

He had lost the receipt slip and had to go through a whole procedure to get the results.

He flipped through it and found that other than the basic vision, weight, blood pressure and so on, there were many Latin abbreviations and medical terms that he did not understand.

The doctor had left two pieces of advice in the final summary. One, he was too light, and that was not a good sign in terms of health. Two, his CEA levels were on the high side, and it was recommended that he consult the related doctors.

Xu Ping flipped back to find after much searching the CEA item under the blood work results: 8.2. The brackets behind it showed the norm was below 6.0.

Xu Ping frowned.

The check-up department had a doctor specifically to answer any inquiries regarding the reports, and there was an incredible line outside. Xu Ping had to wait for a long time.

The doctor was a middle-aged man wearing glasses.

Xu Ping passed his report to him.

“I’d like to know what a high CEA means.”

The doctor looked through his results and asked with a frown, “Do you smoke?”

“I don’t.”

“Have you ever been diagnosed with cirrhosis or pancreatitis?”

“No.”

“Has your stool been normal recently?”

“…I think so?”

“Do you get bloody stool?”

“No…”

“Have you eaten lunch yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Great. Take this report and register at gastroenterology. Ask for a gastroscopy and colonoscopy.”

Xu Ping remained silent for a bit before asking in a whisper, “Could you please tell me what this CEA is?”

“It’s just a glycoprotein. A high number usually means you have some problems with your digestive system, but we can’t say for sure until we do an examination. Go register downstairs. Gastroenterology is on the third floor.”

Xu Ping lay sideways on a white cot with his mouth open.

The doctor stuck a black plastic tube through his mouth. Even though local anaesthetics had been applied, the feeling of a foreign object in his esophagus was far from comfortable. His gag reflex made him want to puke, and his saliva dribbled out from his lips.

The doctor reminded him not to swallow, so he could only bear with it.

The entire procedure took half an hour. Because it was a biopsy, he could still feel a burning pain from his stomach two hours after the examination.

The doctor asked him to come on Friday for his results and to try to eat liquid foods, and no vegetables, fruits or dairy products for the colonoscopy on Friday.

Just thinking about it made Xu Ping uncomfortable, especially since he had a blind date on that day.

He was still very concerned, so he consulted the doctor before leaving.

The doctor only said they would discuss it after the biopsy results. His tone was calm and collected, and he didn't blink even a lash.

Xu Ping was very busy throughout the week. He had previously taken too many days off and now had an endless stack of work. A book he was responsible for was to be sent to the press next month, but the editing had not been completed yet. Wang Zedong reminded him every day in his office about the blind date on Friday, reminding him about the suit, leather shoes and haircut. Not even his brother let him rest easy. Apparently Xu Zheng had eaten something bad and had diarrhea for the entire Wednesday night. Xu Ping could only take him to the hospital in the middle of the night for intravenous drips.

Xu Ping was almost driven insane.

It wasn't that he did not think about the report. He looked up CEA online the day he returned from the hospital. Its original name was carcinoembryonic antigen,[79] and this made his hands and feet

[79] The text should be rendered "Its Chinese name was *gan* (cancer) *pei* (embryo) *kang yuan* antigen.'" The term can be translated literally so I omitted the "Chinese."

cold. But the information online also pointed out that a high level of CEA could be the result of many things, and the single item could not be used to diagnose cancer alone. Moreover, 8.2 was higher than the norm, but actual cancer patients had CEA levels higher than 10.0, so many hospitals argued that “less than 10.0” should be the norm. From this, it seemed he was fine.

Don’t fret for nothing, he told himself.

He chose to push this matter aside because worry could not give him any answers. The doctor was right. Everything should wait for the biopsy results, and before that, life continued as always.

The bottom line was that he was not alone. He had a brother to take care of.

Noontime on Friday, Xu Ping asked Wang Zedong for leave and went to the barbershop for a haircut. The hairstylist was a sixteen-year-old boy with bleached golden hair who gave him a Japanese hair magazine to pick his preferred style. Xu Ping looked through every single page but found none he liked. Every model looked more effeminate than the last, and he was surprised to find that Japanese men styled their eyebrows.

He closed the magazine and asked the hairstylist to give him a buzz cut in spite of the teenager’s insistent advice to do otherwise.

With his hair dealt with, Xu Ping went straight to the hospital without going home.

The doctor he saw last time was not working. After some consideration, Xu Ping decided to register for a specialist.

While sitting on his seat waiting for his appointment, Xu Ping thought of his dad. His old man was in his early sixties when he passed away and just six months prior had participated in some television show’s shoot. He had felt discomfort in his throat and coughed a lot during the shoot. Xu Chuan himself had not thought much of it and only saw a doctor after the show aired. Before the

diagnosis was certain, he kept a merry face, and no one even guessed anything was going on. Only after he received the diagnosis that he was soon to leave this world did he notify Xu Ping in secret.

He had made meticulous arrangements for everything after his death, involving bank accounts and the inheritance of property and such. He even planned his own wardrobe at his funeral, its location and the graveyard. Xu Chuan was very strong during all this. His attitude was not so much calm but cold.

At the end of the end, he only left Xu Ping one utterance. “Don’t abandon your brother.”



“Xu Ping.”

Xu Ping stood up from the bench and followed the nurse into the office.

The doctor was a man around fifty years in age with square-set jaws and peppered sideburns. His name tag said Zhang.

He carefully studied the various test and biopsy results.

He said many things to Xu Ping with many medical terms, over half of which Xu Ping heard but did not understand.

He spotted a small cactus growing on the window ledge with a white flower blooming on the top.

He could feel his heart pumping steadily in his chest.

The windows were set rather high in the wall. From where he was sitting, Xu Ping could see the blinding sun rays. It made him squint.

He had seen the biopsy pictures before seeing the doctor. He didn’t need the doctor to tell him that he had a tumour.

“Is it benign or malignant?” Xu Ping asked with his eyes cast down.

Everything the doctor said, all the medical explanation and analysis, was unimportant. Ultimately, he only had one question to which he needed the answer.

“It’s best if I could discuss this with your family.”

“I have nobody. My dad passed away from throat cancer just two months ago, and my brother…” He paused. “He has severe communication issues.”

The doctor studied him as though discerning whether he was telling the truth.

Xu Ping sat completely still for the doctor to observe. He had already guessed the answer, but he would not think about it as long as the doctor had not announced it.

“It is malignant.”



Forty-two



"*Wild flowers bloomed on the prairie which witnessed the death of the gods*

The wind in the distance was more distant than distance

The sound of my music cried but without tears

–Hai Zi, *September*

Xu Ping did not return home until well past midnight.

He fished out his key but was so drunk he couldn't aim for the keyhole.

Clink. It tumbled onto the floor. He swept his palms around the darkness but could not find it, so he gave up, plopped his butt on the floor and started bawling like a baby.

His brother opened the door for him. Behind him was the warm, orange light from his home.

The man stood at the door staring at the dirty mess of a brother sitting in the hallway.

Slowly, Xu Ping raised his head from between his knees. His face was wet with tears.

He flashed a smile to his brother. "I lost my key."

He wiped away his tears and tried to stand by holding onto the wall, but his legs were weak and would not listen to him. He toppled onto the floor again.

Xu Zheng bent over and picked up his brother's key from the corner behind the hinges of the door. Then, he hoisted his brother up into his arms.

Xu Ping was shocked for a second, but it quickly went away. He hugged his brother's neck and rested his head against his shoulder.

Xu Zheng's shoulder was very wide and his arms were firm with muscles.

He scanned the living room before deciding to put his brother on the white leather couch.

But Xu Ping shook his head. He was way too filthy.

"Bring me to the bathroom," he whispered with his eyes closed.

His brother carefully placed him on the blue mat in the bathroom. When Xu Ping wobbled, he rushed to hold him.

Holding onto his brother's shoulder, Xu Ping lowered himself to sit on the edge of the tub.

He looked up and stared at Xu Zheng's face. Then, he smiled. "I want to take a bath."

His brother closed the door on his way out.

Xu Ping twisted the tap and let the hot water slowly ease its way up the tub.

He kicked off his leather shoes, unbuttoned his shirt, stripping until he was stark naked. Only then did he sink into the water like a bird that had wet its wings.

Xu Zheng had gone to bed when Xu Ping came out wrapped in a bath towel. The living room light was off. The curtains were not drawn, and he could see the lights from the opposite building.

Xu Ping poured himself a glass of water but stopped halfway. He zoned out with the glass in his hand. The streetlights by the paths

between the buildings were still lit, and the summer night bugs swarmed around the bulbs. The shadows of the trees were shrouded by the night, and only when the wind blew past did the branches swish and shuffle.

He rinsed the glass and switched off the kitchen light.

He padded across the dark living room and lingered outside his brother's bedroom for a moment before quietly turning the doorknob.

Under the moonlight peeking in from the windows, he could see his brother lying on his side.

After a long pause, Xu Ping eased the door closed behind him.

The click of the lock awoke Xu Zheng who jerked awake and propped himself up.

"*Gege*?"

Xu Ping stayed silent for a while before whispering, "Are you sleeping?"

"Not yet," his brother replied.

Xu Ping walked over and sat down on the bed.

Xu Zheng sat up straight, waiting in the darkness for his brother to speak.

"I don't want to sleep alone tonight. Can you keep me company?"

His brother didn't respond. The two brothers often slept together during the winter, but ever since the year Xu Ping was locked up, the two had not shared a bed.

Xu Zheng lifted up his blanket, and Xu Ping hopped onto the bed. His brother brought him into his firm embrace.

Everything became a blur in the dark. Xu Zheng's warmth enveloped him, and in that moment, tears welled in his eyes.

So many years had passed, all that time gone to waste through stupidity. He thought he still had a long time to spend with his brother. The sun would rise, and the sun would set. Day after day, year after year, they would grow old together, become old men with

white hair and loose teeth. And maybe then he would tell his brother about his feelings. They were originally brothers but were even closer, and there was nothing in this world that could sever their bond. There was no need for the word “love” in the face of such a vast span of time.

Xu Ping wrapped his arms around his brother’s neck.

“Do you remember when we were young? And there was no heat in the winter, and it would be freezing in our house? I remember I’d delay coming to bed until you had warmed it. Only then did I get changed and lie down.”



His brother gazed into his eyes seriously. “*Gege* is cold?”

Xu Ping chuckled. “Very cold.”

His brother unhooked his arms and breathed onto his hands. He gently rubbed the fingertips before flattening the palms and placing it against his chest.

So many years had passed. The sea and the land stayed the same while the people changed. But there was only one person who would still care and warm his hands for him.

Xu Ping cried silently.

His brother wiped the tears on his cheek.

“What is wrong, *Gege*?”

Xu Ping grabbed the hand hovering above his cheek and spread out the fingers to plant a light kiss on the centre of the palm.

His brother’s palm was rough and bumpy with the calluses from manual labour.

Xu Zheng began shaking slightly and his eyes went wide.

Xu Ping kept their eyes locked without looking away this time.

He slowly leaned in and planted a soft kiss on his brother’s lips.

Xu Zheng froze, dumb from shock.

Xu Ping leaned in for another kiss.

His brother stared dumbly back at him.

The third time, he cupped his brother's face and gave a long kiss, gently sucking on his lips.

When he finished, Xu Zheng let out a loud puff of air and began panting.

Xu Ping sat up and pulled back the blanket from the two of them.

His brother had on a pair of black square briefs, and his member was already aroused. His upper body was propped up, and under the moonlight his body appeared all the more toned and even.

Xu Ping leaned in again for another kiss, but this time he let his eyes flutter shut as though he were shy.

He stopped as he took out his brother's penis from his underpants.

Hot and hard, it was like a metal rod encased in silk.

Xu Ping bent over and took it into his mouth.

Immediately, Xu Zheng threw his head back moaning. He breathed in big gasps, and the muscles on his abdomen rose and fell roughly.

His brother's mouth felt warm and wet, a sensation that was strange yet brought him overwhelming pleasure.

Xu Ping lay still between his brother's legs for some time. He was trying to take it in more deeply, but Xu Zheng was endowed and made his job difficult.

He placed a hand on his brother's stomach brushing as he would to calm a wild horse.

His brother was quickly domesticated.

Xu Ping began sucking.

He was lacking in speed and technique, but his action was one of strong affection as though his brother's shaft were a precious treasure. He was sucking it as though he were a fish out of water trying to find a water source. This added a peculiar holiness to the indecent act as if a devout disciple were engaged in a certain

spiritual worship. He loved it. He admired it. And he wanted to give up his everything so that it could feel pleasure.

Xu Zheng arched his head back and let out another moan with his eyes closed. He felt a strange, new tingle work its way up from the base of his spine. So intense was this sensation that he had to ball his hands and flex his muscles to counter it.

Xu Ping caressed his brother's testicles feeling their heavy fullness. He took a glance up at his brother to find the man's face contorted in pain and lust. He gave an especially strong suck.

Xu Zheng sprung up from the bed like a fish, and he released his load before he landed.

Sliding the shaft out of his mouth, Xu Ping sat up straight.

He wiped off the milky droplets on his lips with his fingers.

A wide-eyed Xu Zheng lay on the bed staring at him with disbelief.

Xu Ping flashed a smile before leaving the bed to rinse out his mouth.

His previous dirty change of clothes still lay in a pile on the bathroom floor. Xu Ping threw some cold water onto his face, a face that was sickly pale in the mirror.

He touched his own face.

His bare torso was very gaunt, his shoulders sticking out awkwardly.

Flesh today, dust tomorrow.

He tightened his grip on the edge of the sink.

A bottle of lubricant sat in the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

Xu Ping had made up his mind.

Xu Zheng heard a noise and sat up to look at him.

Xu Ping shut the door and placed the bottle on the bedside table. He was naked save the white towel around his waist.

He gazed at his brother for a long time.

"*Gege*."

Xu Ping placed a finger lightly on his brother's lips.

He bent down and, like a small animal, nuzzled the tips of their noses together

Xu Zheng closed his eyes in bliss as their breath merged in the air.

Xu Ping lifted up the towel to reveal his skinny thighs and began crawling towards his brother to straddle his waist.

He brushed his fingers along his brother's face, from the forehead to the brows, from the brows to the nose, from the nose to the lips.

He caressed his brother's neck gently but also with a hint of nonchalance, and this nonchalance contained a certain sexiness.

His brother gazed at him, bewitched.

Xu Ping's fingers trailed down his brother's chest, lifted up his tank top and reached his abdomen.

His brother stiffened, and his six ab muscles moved with his breathing. His skin was smooth but his muscles were as hard as steel.

Xu Ping circled his fingers near his navel and felt the slight tremours running through Xu Zheng's muscles.

He beckoned for his brother to come closer. Xu Zheng propped himself higher.

Xu Ping rolled up his tank top from the waist up until it was tossed away.

His brother's torso was evenly toned like a Greek sculpture.

Xu Ping sat face to face with his brother.

He saw his brother's entranced gaze.

He placed his brother's palm against his cheek and gently nuzzled against it with his eyes closed.

He led his brother's hand along his forehead, brows, nose and lips. He led him in caressing his neck and sliding down over the collarbone.

He placed his brother's hand against his chest. Xu Ping's heart was beating steadily – *badum badum* – underneath the warm skin.

He gazed at his brother for a very long time before leaning in and planting a soft kiss at the corner of his lips.

He saw his brother's eyes widen.

He placed his own right hand against his brother's chest feeling the powerful pulse beneath the muscles.

Keeping his eyes locked on Xu Zheng, he tilted his head and with his left hand touched the corner of his own lips.

His brother leaned in for a kiss.

Xu Ping smiled.

He hugged his brother's neck and delivered his own lips to the man.

They were truly kissing, tongue to tongue, lip against lip.

It lasted for so long that they were still connected by a silvery strand of saliva by the time they parted.

Xu Ping then led his brother's hand to his thighs that were not concealed by the towel.

He led it in caressing him, again and again.

With his arms around his brother's neck, he sat a bit taller on his knees.

Xu Zheng's hands slid beneath the towel without being taught to do so and travelled up along his legs, squeezing his butt cheeks.

His brother's hands were coarse and forceful causing some pain for Xu Ping, but unbearable lust rose from deep within even more so.

Eyes closed, he let out a soft yelp.

Immediately, his brother's arms tightened around him. He felt his burning rod poking on his inner thighs.

He planted a gentle kiss on the crown of his brother's head.

He let go of his brother's neck and undid the towel around his waist.

Now Xu Ping was naked, and his penis was erect.

He sat against the wall, spreading his legs in front of his brother, putting his everything up for display.

And Xu Zheng responded with a dumb stare.

He grabbed the lubricant and squeezed some onto his crotch.

He began to play with his own penis and testicles at a very slow pace.

He knew his brother was staring at him, but he threw his head back and closed his eyes.

His fingers trailed down and circled his hole until both his fingers and the opening were completely wet. Then he inserted one digit.

At first, only the nail disappeared, but eventually the entire finger vanished.

Xu Ping let out a soft gasp, paused, and then started to pump the digit.

Once, twice.

Even with his eyes closed, he could hear the lewd, moist sounds of his fingers rubbing against his insides.

He tried his best not to think of how embarrassing he must have looked, stark naked, legs splayed wide open in front of his brother.

Under the moonlight, Xu Ping's fair skin seemed to glow like luminous pearls. His face showed that he was slightly in pain like a suffering cleric, but his body was letting off the opposite, an obscene lustful air.

Xu Zheng had never seen such an extraordinary, alluring *Gege*. He was panting heavily, and it felt as though he would explode any minute.

Meanwhile, Xu Ping had two fingers inside himself.

They pumped in and out, sometimes revealing a glimpse of the risqué rose inside but blocking it again in the next moment.

Xu Ping slid out his digits. The lubricant had become thick from the friction and clung in strands between his fingers. Xu Ping wiped it on his thigh.

He opened his eyes and tilted his head at his brother.

“Do you know what to do?” His eyes flitted away as he asked shyly.

Xu Zheng’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, but he did not speak.

Xu Ping hugged him by the neck and kissed him, chasing his tongue with his own, while easing him onto his back.

He covered his brother’s eyes with a hand as he threw his head back and fed his brother’s rock hard erection into himself.

Forty-three



"*I returned the distance to the prairie*

One was called wood, the other horsehair
The sound of my music cried but without tears

–Hai Zi, *September*

Xu Ping did not move for a long time.

Pain pierced through him like a spear. He felt as though he was being ripped apart.

He couldn't do anything but clench his jaws and bear it.

Even breathing hurt.

Xu Zheng pushed away the hand on his eyes to find the shocking sight of his penis buried in his brother.

Oh so very warm and tight.

The pain sent light tremours through Xu Ping making his muscles contract. His insides tightened and loosened like some kind of living being.

Xu Zheng was overwhelmed by the bliss that his brother's body brought him. He had no idea he could do such a thing with his *gege*. For a while, all he did was stare dumbly at the man straddling him.

Xu Ping was in so much pain his brows were scrunched up in pain and his member had wilted.

His brother tried to sit up.

Xu Ping let out a groan and held the man down by the chest. “Don’t move.”

Xu Zheng propped his upper half up before stopping. He could see the pain in Xu Ping.

“Stop this. *Gege* hurts.”

He reached out to lift Xu Ping off from him.

Xu Ping shook his head. He flashed a weak smile. “Dummy.”

He leaned in and kissed his brother.

He pulled his brother’s hand to his member and led it in stroking it.

He let go and tilted his head.

Xu Zheng paused and looked at his brother before resuming the stroking.

Xu Ping arched his neck and closed his eyes. He felt his brother’s hand massaging his penis. The man’s palm was fire hot.

Xu Ping began to move. He eased his hips up and then slowly back down. The magnitude of movement was tiny, but the pain it brought was severe. His brother was so hot and hard that it felt as though his insides were being scorched away by the sheer friction. It took all his strength to stifle his voice.

But Xu Zheng let his go free. He had never experienced sex, and the blissful friction in the tight cavity tossed him high into the air.

“*Gege*!” He shouted.

Taking him by the hand, Xu Ping let his brother sit up.

Hugging him by the neck, he tilted his head to join his brother in a deep kiss.

His brother’s arms were tightly wrapped around him, and his thick shaft was buried deeply in him.

He started moving, sliding against his brother, this time much harder. He felt his brother grind against his insides, but before he left his body, he sat back down.

His brother let out a loud moan and curled his toes.

Xu Ping felt as though he were about to be sucked into a bottomless whirlpool. His body was sending him alarm signals telling him to stop, but his mind was in a state of divine ecstasy. He felt like he was a medieval cleric praying while being flogged; the physical pain only brought spiritual pleasure.

He pulled himself up before slamming back down.

His body had become a tool, and his soul was standing so far away he could not see it.

His brother's coarse hands roamed his backside, and one of his butt cheeks was being kneaded roughly.

His brother was getting impatient and thrusting his hips upwards.

I won't be able to hold him down much longer. Xu Ping thought with his eyes closed. *He is a good learner.*

He clung to his brother's neck as a survivor at sea to a piece of driftwood.

Xu Zheng's arms encircled him, and his member was penetrating him with unstoppable force.

Pain exploded in his mind like a signal flare obscuring even his vision.

Too fast. Too painful. This isn't what I had in mind at all.

He was holding on to his brother's shoulders, his nails digging into the flesh.

He wanted to scream, but his throat was a trumpet stuffed with cotton completely unable to generate sound.

He was flying into the air with every thrust, rocking like a ship about to be tipped over by the stormy waves. He stopped trying to

move like a sailor ready to face his destiny at the bottom of the ocean.

His brother was attacking him as though he were a beast, his body tense from the excitement. The taut muscles, the slick skin, and the veins on his neck about to burst all gave him an overpowering, wild charisma.

Everything cultivated and worldly had left not a single mark on his body. He lived in his own world where he was a lion wandering the vast, empty planet.

"Don't abandon your brother."

This utterance suddenly popped into Xu Ping's mind, and he let out a wail as though he had been pierced through the middle.

"*Aaahh!*"

Violently and mercilessly, he bit down on his brother's shoulder. He tasted the trickling sweat drops on his neck, salty and bitter.

The unexpected pain only made Xu Zheng more excited. He grabbed Xu Ping's thighs and forced them farther apart. He wanted to bury himself deeply inside his brother, not only because *Gege*'s warm, tight body gave him a pleasure so intense he could not describe it, but because he felt a tiny seed of glee blossoming inside him. He had been living in the dark all his life pursuing a light that he could not comprehend, and when this light appeared before him, dazzling despite its miniscule size, he became so thrilled he did not know what to do other than race towards that single source of light with everything he had.

He held his brother tightly, more tightly than he ever had held another person. Sweat dripped from his forehead and hit Xu Ping's back. He spread it out over the clean span of skin. Now *Gege* was his from head to toe. It was the first time he had felt like this. That which he had thirsted for but which he had never obtained – his brows, his eyes, his mouth, his neck, every single bone in his body,

every drop of blood and piece of flesh beneath his skin, the only light in his life – was now his, totally and absolutely. It was all his.

Letting out a roar, Xu Zheng pushed himself in even more deeply. His brother was enveloping him, enticing him with the cavity he could not see. He thought he was a honeybee who was attracted by the rich fragrance exuded by the flower before him. His stinger pierced the flower's tube, but every time he thought he had reached the end he would only discover that it was longer and deeper.

He moved his brother from his lap and laid him onto the bed.

Xu Ping's skinny body was glowing white and blooming like a queen of the night.

I'm a bee. Xu Zheng told himself.

He parted his brother's legs and slowly plunged his stinger into the depth.

Xu Ping could not do anything at this point. His mind had stopped working.

He was like an insect pinned onto a board in order to be made into a bio-specimen. Occasionally he would shudder from the pain, but the rest of the time he could only hang from his brother's neck and let the man do as he pleased.

He lost track of time. The long night seemed without an end, but daylight – Xu Ping prayed – daylight had better never come.

He wrapped his legs around his brother's waist to pull the man closer to himself.

His brother leaned down to kiss him and steadily continued to penetrate him while doing so.

Xu Ping recalled a childhood memory of him washing his brother in the big basin. Xu Zheng was tiny, and his hands and feet were so tender. The boy would mewl like a kitten when soap got into his eyes because he could not talk clearly then. Xu Ping was

only seven years old in second grade. The sun then seemed that much brighter, the sky that much bluer. The world was simple and clearer. Even the flowers all bloomed with their own unique hue.

Xu Ping remembered his brother sitting in the basin playing with the water. He approached holding a towel, and his brother looked up with his big, bright eyes. Under the sunlight shining through the window, he held out his arms for a hug.

"Mmmmm…" Xu Ping could not stifle the moan.

The member inside him seemed to have grown bigger, the scorching length splitting him open like a wedge and then filling him up. Every time it left his body it was as if his soul was being sucked away.

His groin was numb to the pain now, but deep inside another strange, new sensation was arising. At first it was a weak seedling that lent him a helping hand amidst the seemingly endless pain. Then it started growing silently along with every one of his brother's thrusts, extending new branches through his blood vessels. They crawled along his thighs towards the rest of his body, and every time his brother brought him pleasure a tiny white flower would bloom. After one wilted, new tendrils would start growing thicker and constrain him more tightly.

"Ahhhh…!" Xu Ping started shouting.

He pounded his brother's back with his fists. Pain he could endure, but this ecstatic pleasure was about to shatter his inner organs.

For the first time he feared his own body.

"Stop it! Get off of me!" He screeched.

His brother obviously heard but pretended otherwise. He ignored the hands beating and clawing on his back and grabbed Xu Ping's thighs pushing them apart to an incredulous angle. In reality, he had opened Xu Ping up in his entirety before his eyes. He could

see his brother's gracefully shaped penis, bulging sacs and the entrance that was filled with him.

He saw the lubricant that had thickened and become white stuck to the base of his member.

He pulled out a little before pounding back in.

His brother kept screaming and shaking while his insides convulsed. His expression seemed painful but also displayed a mysterious bliss.

Erotic beyond description.

He dipped down for a fervent kiss.

As Xu Ping screamed, his brother pumped in and out of him like a wild beast. Every wave of pleasure pushed him high into the air. His remaining rationality was the only rope tying him down, but it was about to snap very soon.

"Ahhhh… No, stop it! Stop it!" He cried words that he did not understand either.

The monstrous waves were only growing in stature, threatening to drown him.

I'm going to die. Xu Ping thought.

He writhed for his life, kicking his legs trying to unlodge his brother, but the man had him securely locked beneath him. His two hands clasped onto his legs like metal clamps.

The muscles on Xu Zheng's face were tense in a peculiar way making him appear strange and dangerous and even an awesome icon of authority.

Xu Ping had never before seen this expression on his brother.

Tears streamed down his face.

He no longer was feeling pain, only the pleasure hitting him again and again. He felt that something deep inside his soul, the identity of which he did not know, was about to be set free. It had been dormant in the dark for too long, but now that his body was

being torn apart by his brother, that thing was going to escape from their confines deep within him.

He tightened around his brother.

Xu Zheng squeezed his brother's butt forcefully as he pushed in harder than he had ever done.

Xu Ping gaped as his breathing stopped and his eyes widened.

He was tossed high, high into the sky, past the clouds to where the blinding sun was.

He came as though he were urinating, the white fluid landing all over his chest and belly.

And before he fell back down from his climax, his brother pulled him up and with a roar planted his seeds into him.



Forty-four



"*In the distance were only the wild flowers amassed by death*
The moon hung high and bright, a mirror over the millennia
The sound of my music cried but without sound
Alone, I rode through the prairie.

–Hai Zi, *September*

The telephone in the living room kept ringing for a long time before switching to voice mail after a loud beep. The sun was high in the sky, shining into the room through the glass.

Xu Ping's lashes fluttered in the golden rays. He furrowed his brows before his eyes opened, and he raised an arm to block the sun.

His brother was fast asleep lying sideways next to him. He was completely naked save for the blanket over his waist, and he had an arm draped on Xu Ping.

Xu Ping gently eased the arm off and struggled to sit up.

There was not a muscle in his body that did not ache. His skeleton seemed loose too like an old chair that would creak when it was sat on.

He sat on the bed and spaced out until his skin stung from the sunlight.

He buried his face into his hands.

The latter part of his memory of last night was cloudy like a cassette tape after exposure to high temperature. After the first time that he was fucked to orgasm by his brother, he felt light and floaty as if he had smoked marijuana. All the trouble, all the pain and all the fear regarding his future and fate vanished with a poof along with the thick semen that shot out of him. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. Whether it was life or death, it all seemed out of touch like a spirit in the other dimension. All that mattered was the present.

He wagged his tail and begged like a dog, grinding his brother's penis with his crotch like a bitch in heat. With his hands and mouth, he cared for it until it became hard again, and he fed it into himself impatiently. He gyrated on his brother, legs splayed wide open, without a care in the world. His face no longer carried tolerance and pain but instead a lustful joy. As though the constraints on his soul had been entirely torn apart, the most evil and indecent side of Xu Ping had been uncovered and released.

He played with himself without any restraint, rubbing on his own penis and massaging his sac. He even stuck his fingers in his mouth, wetting them before toying with his own nipples, squeezing and pulling on them until they were red and swollen.

He begged for pleasure and then some more as he imagined his brother's penis thrusting into him like a long sword. He no longer felt pain, no longer felt sorrow. His body had turned into an instrument for sex, and every penetration gave him incredible bliss.

Forgetting himself, he let his voice go free, screaming louder and louder. He wanted to just die in his brother's hands.

He was full of semen to the point it would drip down his thighs whenever he moved.

He stayed entertwined with his brother like two snakes. Unable to leave the man, he kept seducing him.

The last bit he could remember was being exhausted physically after his brother shot his load into him for the nth time. His brother

pulled out and fell back onto the bed panting furiously, but Xu Ping was still unsatisfied mentally. He parted his legs and fingered his hole making semen dribble out continuously, and then he spread it over his penis and inner thigh. He held his legs up, and with his right index and middle fingers he propped open his abused entrance beckoning his brother softly and lazily, "*Xiao*-Zheng, come lick *Gege*."



Forty-five



"*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,*

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

–William Butler Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

Xu Ping awoke naked in bed to see the sky outside the window. White clouds floated idly by, and the sky was a clear azure. He heard pigeons cooing from a neighbour's balcony before flapping their wings and flying away.

The temperature was high, and he had sweated so much that he felt sticky and gross all over.

Ten o'clock, Monday morning. His brother had gone to work at the factory. Xu Ping was still asleep when he left, as he was dead tired. Other than to eat or to use the toilet, neither of them left the bed for a second the whole weekend. By the end of all the lovemaking, his brain was fried, and he couldn't think at all. All he knew to do was pursue carnal pleasure, and he could not bear to leave his brother's body as though he had acquired an addiction.

Xu Ping sat up rubbing his aching head. His groin was numb and sore. He didn't want to move.

His brother might have said something to him when he was still asleep and even kissed him on the lips. He muttered back a vague reply, but he could not remember what.

Trying to ignore the headache, he shuffled slowly to the living room for a phone call. Only after he confirmed with the factory head that Xu Zheng had arrived safely did he feel at ease.

After he hung up, he found that the answering machine was full. There were more than a dozen missed calls, mostly from the chief editor, Wang Zedong. Only one was from an unfamiliar number.

Not wanting to listen to the messages, he redialed the new number and found it was the hospital's reception desk. The lady receptionist asked him which room he wanted, and he paused before telling her he had the wrong number.

Without a stitch on, Xu Ping sat on the couch while the sun illuminated the entire living room. He had never tried walking around home without any clothing, but the feeling of the sunlight on his bare skin felt strange and new to him. It almost felt like countless pairs of small hands were scratching on him.

It was quiet, upstairs and downstairs. The neighbours had gone to work or school, and not even his brother was home.

For the first time he was left home alone, and it felt as though the whole world had become deserted under the sunlight.

He stood up and went to take a cold shower. The cool water gave him goose bumps, but his head gradually cleared up.

Piece by piece, he dressed himself, buttoning his shirt and fixing his hair in front of the mirror.

Only after he was impeccably clothed did he sit down once again beside the telephone.

The moment he pressed the play button, he could hear Wang Zedong's thunderous roar through the machine.

"Xu Ping, do you still want your job, or what?! You don't come to work without even a phone call! You were the only one missing

at the company meeting this morning! Do you know you have to submit your corrected drafts today?! Don't think for a second you'll get a penny of the bonus this month! Call me back right now!"

Xu Ping pressed the skip button.

The next three messages were pretty much the same deal. Wang Zedong used various sentences and expressions to vent his ill-temper, threatening to deduct Xu Ping's wages and bonus so Xu Ping would suffer this month.

Xu Ping didn't even flinch.

The fifth message was from the hospital. It was a brief one advising him to come to the hospital to discuss matters regarding the surgery.

Xu Ping did not listen to the rest.

He deleted everything and left with his bag.

First, he went to the bank. The ICBC branch nearby was busy no matter what time of day. The queues were long, and the air conditioning was not functioning. This made everyone irritable. The old man at the front of the line was having an argument with the bank clerk for some reason, spitting very harsh words. The people behind him stood with their arms crossed or else fanned themselves with newspapers, remaining aloof spectators. Annoying noises were buzzing all around.

Xu Ping had to wait for nearly an hour for his turn. The clerk was the same one who had argued with the old man from earlier, and her tone and mood were just as bad. Xu Ping studied her face through the glass to find her eyes raw.

Everyone encounters unfortunate, unavoidable situations.

Xu Ping withdrew ten thousand yuan from the two hundred thousand or so in the bank account, wrapped it in a black plastic bag and stuffed it into his briefcase before leaving.

He hailed a taxi cab and headed straight for the People's Hospital.

He sat in the gastroenterology drop-in room. Across from him was Doctor Zhang who had passed the verdict of cancer on him last Friday.

Through the floral print frames of his glasses, the doctor observed Xu Ping's expression for some time. He took off his glasses, laid them on the table and crossed his hands. "Normally we should not be discussing treatment plans with you. The results are better if the patient does not know the details."

Xu Ping considered for a moment. "My parents have passed away, and my brother has cognitive issues. He doesn't know anything. I don't have any other relatives."

Doctor Zhang nodded.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

"Like what?" Xu Ping wondered.

"Usually patients have a hard time accepting the reality that they have cancer. They all hope it was a false positive and request multiple examinations and diagnoses. Some even visit other hospitals to double-check."

Xu Ping nodded.

He stayed quiet with his head down but suddenly snapped up and asked, "Doc, is cancer hereditary?"

The doctor answered after a pause, "Although it has not been proven clinically, that has been the assumption. Especially for breast cancer and liver cancer patients – their relatives have a relatively higher likelihood of getting cancer."

Xu Ping's lips jerked upward in a wry smile.

"But higher likelihood does not mean one will get it. The key is the postnatal conditions like mental, environmental and dietary factors. An exhausting job, too much stress, irregular meals and so on can all be causes for cancer."

Xu Ping looked down.

"The most important thing for the patient is to understand, cancer does not mean death. There is still a high probability that a patient will recover if surgery is performed in time. No matter what, do not lose hope or faith."

Xu Ping nodded slightly.

"It would be best to arrange a date for the surgery. After that, there is chemotherapy, and you may need to stay in the hospital for some time." He paused. "The operation, chemotherapy and living costs are not cheap. I'd say over one hundred thousand."

"I understand."

The doctor let out a breath of relief.

"If you are on board, we will run another round of tests today and then transfer you to the oncology department in our hospital after we've confirmed your diagnosis. We should book a date for surgery as early as possible."

Xu Ping looked up in surprise. "You're not responsible for the surgery?"

Doctor Zhang shook his head as he filled out some forms. "The surgeon is another doctor. Rest assured, Doctor Zhao in oncology studied in Germany and has many years of clinical experience with this type of surgical procedure. His technique is exceptional."

Xu Ping only felt dizzy and found it hard to breathe.

He grabbed the table corner. "Doctor Zhao Desheng?"

The doctor looked up. "You know him? He's quite famous in this city."

Xu Ping thought of the flowers that looked like a blanket of snow. He was reminded of his dad with tubes stuck in him as he lay, weak and frail, on the bed. He recalled the red light above the operating room and the sick, white hospital hallway. He remembered a doctor with glasses walking out, removing his mask and saying to him, "I'm sorry."

He gasped for his breath until he could muster a reply and a miserable smile. “How could I not? My dad died under his knife.”



Forty-six



"*And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,*
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

–William Butler Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

As Xu Ping stepped out of the hospital's main entrance, the noontime sun was so strong he could barely keep his eyes open.

A long string of taxis was parked by the curb outside. A middle-aged driver poked his head out while honking his horn, hollering, "You need a ride, sir?!"

Xu Ping seemed not to have heard. Neck tucked in, he climbed down the stairs and somehow missed a step.

His tumble was truly ridiculous, and a few people started laughing.

Paying no attention to that, Xu Ping slowly made his way back up onto his feet. He dusted himself off and picked up his briefcase lying alongside, but he found he was missing a shoe.

He found it in the bushes and stiffly bent down to put it back on.

There was a gaping hole in the front that split open with every step he took, showing the black, patched socks inside.

The cab driver pursed his lips and withdrew into the car, returning to his newspaper. Soon, a mother climbed in with her son in tow after a hospital visit, and they merged into the city's traffic with a spluttering exhaust pipe.

Xu Ping watched the car disappear around the corner before slowly turning back.

He picked a random direction and started walking in his cracked shoe. With every step he took, the left shoe would open wide like an alligator's mouth.

A girl wearing a white dress pointed at him. "Mom, Mom, look at his shoe!" The mother's eyes flitted awkwardly around before she dragged her daughter away by the arm.

Xu Ping did not hear a sound.

He thought he might have gone deaf. He couldn't hear the car horns. He couldn't hear the noisy crowds. He couldn't hear the street vendors hollering. He walked the busy street filled with bobbing heads, but it seemed like a silent film.

He shoved away a woman carrying a grocery basket in front of him. The woman glared back at him and cursed impatiently.

He could not hear a thing.

Xu Ping slapped his ears.

How strange, he thought. What is wrong with me?

He looked up at the sun and found it oh, so dazzling.

"I have to be honest with you, sir. We have been doing this huge promotion recently, and all tours are on sale. Domestic or international. See, this seven-day trip to Lhasa and Nyingchi, only forty-nine ninty-nine per person. You can go to any other agency and you won't find a price lower than ours. If you don't like Tibet, there's Dali and Lijiang, round-trip airfare, six-day tour for thirty-

nine ninty-nine. You stay in private mansions at Guanfang Garden Villa Lijiang. This is our biggest promotion…"

Xu Ping lifted the wet towel on his forehead and struggled to sit up on the couch.

In the bright storefront, there was a desk with an old desktop and a cute, dog-shaped stationery container. There were various travel brochures on a short shelf on the side, and numerous scenic posters were plastered on the wall. There was no air conditioning in the room, only an old electric fan rotating and circulating hot air. A young, round-faced girl with short hair was sitting on a low chair beside him looking quite lively. She continued her relentless advertisement while she fanned Xu Ping with a paper fan that was clearly a souvenir from Lijiang travels.



"Just take a look, sir. Our agency offers tons of different packages. There's Jiuzhai Valley, Mount Emei, Sanya, Hong Kong. People are so stressed at work nowadays, they need to recharge. And what better way to recharge than to travel?"

Xu Ping raised a hand to stop her. He held his head and frowned. "Where…How did I get here?"

"Oh." The girl explained less enthusiastically, "I was passing out flyers on the street, and you took one, but you'd only taken a few steps before passing out from heat stroke. I thought, I couldn't just leave this guy on the ground. And thankfully our office was nearby, so I brought you here."

Xu Ping read the printing stuck to the glass and repeated hesitantly, "Rose…Travel Agency?"

"Yeah!" The girl exclaimed. "I'm Liu. Liu Meigui.[80] Nice name, eh?"

Xu Ping rubbed his lips together instead of expressing his opinion.

[80] The name of the rose flower.

He laid the towel on the back of a chair and said, “Thank you. I need to go.”

Just as he stood up, he felt another dizzy spell. He clung to the back of the couch for stability.

Meigui helped him sit back down and fanned him even harder.

“Drink some cold water.”

Xu Ping took a sip from the glass to find his throat parched. He wolfed down the rest.

“Thank you.”

Meigui laughed heartily. “That’s not a problem. Oh, right, sir. Will you really not consider taking a trip? Our current prices are truly unbeatable. You’ll never get a deal like this again. Like this one for Jiuzhai Valley–”

Xu Ping interrupted her. “Ms. Liu…”

“Don’t be so cold. Call me Meigui.”

“…Meigui.” Xu Ping wiggled his big toe on his left foot. “Look at my shoe. Do you think someone like me has money to travel?”

Meigui looked down for a while before replying, “So what? The thread’s just loose. If I had the tools, I’d be able to fix it. I’ve helped my dad fix his before. Plus, poor people can travel the poor way; rich people can travel the rich way. Every person has the right to enjoy beautiful scenery. Even if you had all the money in the world, the mountains will still be mountains. The water will still be water. The world won’t change.”

Xu Ping gazed at her and flashed a gentle smile.

“Are you married, sir?” She sprung up and took out a stack of posters from the shelf. “We have this new package that we put together especially for couples.”

She laid out the poster – an endless stretch of baby blue sky and sea.

“A ten-day and ten-night honeymoon trip on an island about three hours’ flight away from here. You get your own beachside

cottage, a private dock and your own boat. The townspeople almost all live on the other side of the island, two kilometres away. Someone will come to deliver food and to clean during the day, but other than that you will not have any visitors. Think about it, you and your loved one holding hands and walking on the beach during sunset. How wonderful would that be! How many times in a lifetime do we get a chance to make that kind of memory?! I've been to quite a few places myself, but this island is something special. It hasn't been developed very much, and you almost feel its spirit. The people are down-to-earth and pure. I often think when I'm old one day, before I'm about to die, I'd sell everything I own and go to this island, buy a small place by the water and watch the sun rise and set above the ocean, listen to the tides come and go. That way I think I'd be able to face everything and not have any regrets."



Xu Ping pushed open the old, green-painted wooden door to the watch repair shop. He was met with the sight of Feng-*shifu* dressed in a tank top and shorts, wiping his sweat with a towel.

He greeted Xu Ping from faraway, "Look who's here. You're early today."

Xu Ping nodded. "Yeah, I wanted to pick up Xu Zheng early and go out for dinner."

He looked right and left but found no brother.

"Where is he?"

Feng-*shifu* fanned himself with a tattered cattail fan while grumbling, "Went around to the back to wash his face. This godforsaken weather. You could fry an egg on the pavement outside."

Xu Ping laughed.

Feng-*shifu* pulled out a chair. "Come, sit down."

Xu Ping did as he was told.

Feng-*shifu* eyed him for a while. "You don't look too well today, Xu Ping."

Xu Ping touched his face and scoffed wryly, “It’s too hot. I got heat stroke on the way here.”

“Why didn’t you say so!” Feng-*shifu* slapped his thigh. “I have Huoxiang Zhenglu Shui[81] here. You should drink one right now.”

He went to a drawer nearby and rummaged through it.

“No, it’s okay. I’m fine now.” Xu Ping stood up to stop him.

“Oh no. You young’uns don’t know how to take care of yourselves. If you don’t pay attention to the small things, they will grow to become big things. The human body is the same as the clock. You need to care for it constantly, get it fixed if there’s even the smallest problem. Take one loose gear, for example, and you don’t think it’s a big deal. But every gear is linked to another, so all the other gears will get damaged.”

Xu Ping grew quiet.

He took the small bottle, drank it all in one go and said thanks.

Feng-*shifu* moved their seats closer together and started fanning both of them.

Xu Ping opened his briefcase on his lap and took out a paper bag.

“Feng-*shifu*, I don’t know how to thank you for taking care of my brother for so long. This is just a token of my gratitude. Don’t refuse.”

Feng-*shifu* shot him a glance before putting down the fan and opening the package. There were two cartons of soft pack Chung Hwa cigarettes.

Feng-*shifu* picked one carton up to the light to examine. First, delight flashed across his face, but quickly he turned to Xu Ping with a look of suspicion. He pushed the paper bag away and pulled a stiff expression. “Denied!”

Xu Ping froze.

[81] An over-the-counter drug said to combat heat strokes and diarrhea amongst other things.

“There’s no free lunch in this world! You think this old man is senile?! And here I thought you’re a dumb guy, but I can’t believe you’re the same as your dad, full of sneaky ideas. You must have dug my grave for me to jump in after giving me such an expensive gift! You’d better spit it out now, what’s your request?”

Xu Ping chuckled.

“I want to take my brother on a trip in a few days.”

“How long?”

“Half a month.”

“That’s it?” Feng-*shifu* questioned doubtfully.

Xu Ping nodded.

“That’s all. I just wanted to thank you.”

The bead curtains clicked and clattered. It was Xu Zheng returning to the shop. The top half of his t-shirt was wet, and water droplets were clinging to his short hair.

He looked up and caught sight of Xu Ping. He called out, “*Gege*!” and lunged to hug him.

Xu Ping quickly got up from his seat.

He grabbed his brother’s hands and constrained him before turning to Feng-*shifu*.

Somehow, the old man was already leaning back in his rocking chair fanning his fan pretending to nap. The paper bag had vanished, too.

Xu Ping smiled.

“We’ll be on our way, Feng-*shifu*.”

“Mhm,” Feng-*shifu* mumbled a reply with his eyes closed.

Xu Ping gathered his brother’s belongings and pushed open the shop door.

The sun was so brilliant that he had to raise his hand to his forehead to block it.

“Have fun, and take lots of photos for me,” came an utterance from the gloomy, stuffy shop.

Xu Ping paused in silence.

Then he lowered his head and walked out with his brother, hand in hand.



Forty-seven



"*I will arise and go now, for always night and day*
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

–William Butler Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

Hello, Chief Editor Wang.

"*Gege*."

"Yeah?"

Xu Ping looked up from the racks in the male section of a mall. His brother was walking out from the dressing room wearing a new pair of jeans.

Xu Ping went over and pulled on the waist.

"Is it too tight?"

His brother shook his head.

The uniformed sales clerk smiled. "Sir, I've worked here for a long time, and I've never seen anyone wear jeans better than him."

Xu Ping didn't respond.

"Could you please get this pair in a larger size?" He added after a pause. "Navy blue, grey and black, one each, please."

“Sir, jeans look better with a tighter fit. A larger size wouldn’t accentuate the lines of the hips and legs,” the lady kindly suggested.

Xu Ping paused.

“A bigger one is better. He can wear it even when he gets fatter.”

The lady didn’t argue anymore and left.

Xu Ping picked up a shoe box on the leather chair and opened it before his brother.

“Try them on.”

His brother took off his old sneakers and stuck his left foot into one of the brown leather shoes.

“How is it? Comfortable?”

Xu Zheng frowned. “Tight.”

Xu Ping opened another box and placed the black leather shoes in front of his brother.

“What about these?”

Xu Zheng stepped into the right shoe and stomped a few times. “Loose.”

Xu Ping bent over and tied the laces.

“How about now?”

Xu Zheng stomped a few times but did not answer.

Xu Ping made his brother take the shoes off and left the black pair on the chair.

The sales clerk brought back a stack of jeans ranging in hue from lightest to darkest.

Saying thanks, Xu Ping shook out the pair on top and held it against his brother’s legs before passing it to the man. “Try them on.”

Xu Zheng frowned, apparently impatient.

Xu Ping contemplated for a moment and picked out a recently purchased shirt from one of the bags lying on the floor. He took apart the packaging and said, “With this one.”

Xu Zheng looked back at him but did not take the garments.

Things became awkward.

The lady smiled. “Why don’t I help, sir?”

Xu Ping stopped her.

“I’ll do it.” He passed the box of the black leather shoes to her. “Could you please find a few sandals in this size? Grey or brown is fine.”

The lady left with the box in her arms.

Xu Ping gazed at his brother and plopped onto the chair coaxing in a tired voice, “I know you don’t like the mall, but we’ve already bought so much. Could you hang on for a little bit longer?”

Xu Zheng grumbled impatiently, “I hate changing clothes.”

Xu Ping didn’t know how to respond.

He sighed. “Then how about I help you?”

His brother considered for a moment and nodded.

The dressing room was not spacious. The wall across from the door was covered with a mirror.

Xu Ping pushed the latch in before pulling the hem of the shirt out from his brother’s jeans and unbuttoning it from the top down.

They were flanked against each other because of the limited space, and Xu Ping could feel warmth wash over him and the man’s scent touching his nose.

He lowered his gaze and rubbed his lips together.

“Lift your hands.”

Xu Ping shuffled around his brother to take off the shirt.

He turned his brother around by the waist and moved down to the jeans button.

He pulled down the zipper and was about to squat down to remove the pants when Xu Zheng pushed him up against the mirror.

He felt his brother’s member poking his stomach.

Xu Zheng’s eyes lingered on his face before the man leaned down to kiss him.

Xu Ping tilted his head away. “No.”

“Yes!”

Xu Ping glared at him. “What did you promise me? No kissing or hugging outside.”

“This is not outside! Only me and *Gege* here!”

Xu Ping stayed silent for a while before whispering, “No.”

His brother yelled angrily, “I don’t want to change! Go home now!” and began to yank on the jeans.

Xu Ping hurriedly got a hold of him. “Stop it!”

Xu Zheng paid him no heed and focused on removing the pants.

Xu Ping grabbed onto his hands and finally made a compromise. “Only one kiss. You have to try on the clothes after.”

His brother stopped to look at him.

Xu Ping sighed before hugging his brother around the neck and closing his eyes as he leaned in.

His brother’s strong arms held him in a tight embrace.

I do not know how to break this to you. You have taken very good care of me all these years. Rather than a boss, you are like my teacher, older brother and friend. After my sentence, I cannot begin to imagine where I would be if it were not for you.

“That comes to five thousand eight hundred and thirty-one yuan. Would you like to pay by card or cash?”

“Cash.”

“Sir, we are doing a promotion to recruit more members. You can become a gold card member with a purchase of eight eighty-eight or over, and after you collect enough points through purchases in our mall, you can get a twenty percent discount.”

Xu Ping smiled. “No, thanks.”

“Seeing that you shop a lot, sir, you would save a lot of money if you become a member.”

Xu Ping was quiet for a second. “Thank you. I’ll consider it if I shop here again.”

“Sure. That’s six thousand yuan.”

Xu Ping took the change and receipt and signalled to his brother to take the bags.

“Going home?” Xu Zheng asked while eyeing him.

Xu Ping nodded hesitantly.

His brother’s face had been stiff since the moment they stepped foot inside the mall, but now it had finally loosened up.

The man reached for the bags delightedly.

Xu Ping walked towards to the exit as he sorted the change.

“…gay…just now in the dressing room…on his neck…I saw…”

Xu Ping stiffened, and his head snapped towards the direction of the conversation.

The sales clerk from earlier was gossiping quietly with her co-worker with her back turned to him. Her co-worker looked up and noticed Xu Ping, and her expression froze. She patted her shoulder and gestured for her to look behind her.

The sales lady turned and shared eye contact with Xu Ping, her face contorted with shock.

Nobody said a word.

“*Gege*.”

Xu Zheng caught up from behind and reached out for the paper bags in Xu Ping’s hand.

Xu Ping turned to face his brother, his face pale as one of his hands slid mindlessly to the place his brother had kissed.

Xu Zheng did not notice a thing. He shifted all the bags to his left hand and used his right hand to take his *gege*’s hand.

Xu Ping evaded it.

His brother stopped in his tracks and looked back, his hand still sticking out in midair.

“*Gege*?”

Xu Ping could feel the two women’s eyes scorching them like an iron.

Wide-eyed, he looked up into his brother's eyes.

In Xu Zheng's eyes, time was motionless and the world was empty. He was the only thing reflected within.

Xu Ping lowered his head and relaxed his hunched shoulders.

He took one step forward and held his brother's hand. "Sorry, my mind wandered."

Xu Zheng held his fingers tightly, and Xu Ping flashed a smile at his brother.

Xu Ping turned to the place the two clerks were standing to find the counter completely deserted.



The results of the check-up came out, and I was diagnosed with stomach cancer. The day I received the news happened to be the day of the blind date.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, are you ready?"

Xu Ping was sitting in front of the computer in the living room, two packed suitcases by his feet.

His head was lowered as he typed.

His brother still had not replied.

Xu Ping pushed the keyboard in and knocked on his brother's door. Before he received a response, he turned the doorknob and entered.

His brother was staring up at the sun outside the window through a pair of old, blue swimming goggles.

Xu Ping clapped his back. "What are you looking at that's got you so focused? You didn't even reply me."

His brother didn't say anything, only taking off the goggles and passing it to him.

Xu Ping put the goggles over his eyes, and the world turned light, fresh blue like the ocean.

Smilingly Xu Ping took them off and looked them over.

“I thought these were lost. How did you find them?”

His brother did not answer.

“You remember? Dad bought these for you. Mine were green, and yours were blue. He took us to the swimming pool after my junior high graduation…”

Xu Zheng simply gazed at him.

Xu Ping chuckled. “That was twenty years ago. Time passes really fast, huh?”

He rubbed the red marks left on his brother’s temples by the bands.

“Does it hurt?”

Xu Zheng shook his head.

Xu Ping loosened the band and passed the goggles back.

“You’ve grown bigger, so the goggles are smaller. How is that? Any better?”

Xu Zheng put them on, scanned the room and nodded to his brother.

Xu Ping glanced at his watch and slapped his brother’s arm.

“Stop fooling around. We need to leave in ten minutes or else we’ll miss the plane. This is our first trip. Don’t mess it up from the get-go.”

Reluctantly, Xu Zheng removed the goggles.

Xu Ping started laughing.

“You haven’t seen the sea, have you?”

His brother shook his head.

“Me neither,” Xu Ping sighed. “But I heard it’s beautiful. The sky is blue. The ocean’s blue, too. White beach, green coconut trees…”

Xu Ping stopped himself there.

He smiled to his brother. “All right, use the toilet and drink some water before we leave.”

His brother ducked into the bathroom as he was told.

Xu Ping sat down in front of the computer and continued writing his e-mail.

Please forgive me for not talking to you in person, but I cannot tell this to anybody.

I need some time to sort out my personal matters.

The telephone started rining.

Xu Ping picked it up and hung up after a few quick utterances.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, the taxi is downstairs. Are you ready?"

Xu Zheng hurried out of the bathroom.

"I didn't drink water yet."

"Well, hurry," Xu Ping ordered without looking up.



The progress and transfer of work is written in the attachment. The texts that have been proofread have been mailed out as well. I apologize for causing you so much trouble.

I am sorry. Thank you.

Respectfully yours.

Forty-eight



"*When the lamp is shattered*

The light in the dust lies dead–
When the cloud is scattered
The rainbow's glory is shed
When the lute is broken,
Sweet tones are remembered not;
When the lips have spoken,
Loved accents are soon forgot.

–Percy Bysshe Shelley, *When the Lamp is Shattered*

As the automatic glass doors of the airport exit opened, Xu Ping was nearly toppled over by the strong, toasty wind.

The glaring sun reflected off the pavement, forcing Xu Ping to divert his gaze.

He faced another direction and blinked his eyes.

His brother stopped beside him carrying their luggage and used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat on his neck.

"*Gege*, it's so hot."

Xu Ping nodded with a wry smile.

He adjusted the bag strap on his left shoulder and grabbed his brother's hand. "Stay close to me. Don't get lost."

Short and stout palm trees were planted on either side of the corridor. The top of the trees were bushy with slim, long leaves like a long-haired hipster. The planter boxes hosted purple, red and white flowers, and the median strip was neat with evenly cut grass. Automatic sprinklers were working and twirling in place. Perhaps because the lawn had just been mown, the air was thick with the fresh, bitter smell of grass.

White airport limousines and yellow taxi cabs were parked on the roadside. Young female clerks stood behind travel agency booths asking the passing travellers if they needed to book a hotel. Security guards in blue uniform patrolled around with batons on their belts.



Xu Ping stopped and scanned the scene.

Immediately, a local man approached him regarding a private shuttle. Xu Ping backed away with his brother in tow as he waved his hand dismissively.

The man would not give up and stepped towards them, yapping, “Are you here on vacation, sirs? I know the sights around here very well. I can be your guide, one hundred eighty a day. You get a car and a guide. My car is right over there. The white one, you see. It’s a great deal. Please consider it, sir.”

Xu Ping pushed the man a little. “No, thanks. We’ve already booked with a travel agency.”

The man paid no heed and continued in an obnoxious voice, “Which travel agency did you book with, sir? Some of them only reserve hotels for you, no transportation included. Even if they booked you a car, it’s probably not as good a deal as mine…”

Xu Ping pulled his brother close while he looked all around. Then he spotted a dark-skinned man in a red t-shirt holding up a piece of cardboard not too far off. The people going to and fro blocked his line of vision, and it took him a long time to discern his own name written in blue ink on the board.

Xu Ping held up his arm to fend off the rambling man. “Please, out of the way.”

He was stepping aside with his brother in tow when the man grabbed his wrist. “Sir, my car is right over there. Just take a look. It’s very clean. I’ve been doing this for a really long time. I’m not out to rip you off…” he said as he started to drag Xu Ping in another direction.

Xu Zheng gave the man a hard shove on the shoulders making him stumble and nearly topple over.

He steadied himself with a pillar and straightened up, ready to cuss out a storm when he saw Xu Zheng step towards him with an emotionless stare.

Xu Zheng was a tall, hunky guy, and he was wearing a white t-shirt, grey long shorts and a pair of sneakers, his muscular arms and legs exposed. He emitted a faint, overpowering aura as he glared downwards at the man.

Xu Ping grabbed his brother by the arm. “Don’t cause trouble.”

He looked at the man. “We don’t need a car. Our travel agency sent someone to pick us up.”

The man looked at him and then Xu Zheng and spat on the ground before strutting off grumbling.

The short, black man in red t-shirt stared at them dumbly for a while unable to speak.

“I’m Xu Ping.” He pulled his brother closer. “And this is my brother, Xu Zheng. We’re here for the island vacation.”

The man looked at his sign and then at them again.

There were five words written in block print. “Welcome Mister and Missus Xu.”

Xu Ping chuckled.

The man scratched his head before dropping the sign and shaking Xu Ping's hand. "I'm Chen Zhiqiang. Meigui sent me to welcome you. Sir, you can call me *Ah*-Qiang."[82]

While he was at it, he took Xu Ping's bag as well. "The car's over here."

"Didn't Ms. Liu tell you?" Xu Ping dragged his brother along.

Ah-Qiang smiled apologetically. "Meigui told me a guest has reserved the honeymoon cottage and asked me to prepare accordingly, so I thought it was for a newlywed couple."

He slid open the van door and gestured Xu Ping in.

Xu Ping pushed his brother lightly so he would get in first, and then he hopped in, too.

Ah-Qiang jumped in the driver's seat and started the car.

The van exited the airport boulevard and merged onto a highway headed southward.

The wind began to flap. The sun shone in from the left side of the car.

Xu Ping touched the patch of skin on his brother's arm under the sun's rays. "Does it burn?"

His brother nodded.

Xu Ping took out a light jacket from a bag and spread it over his brother.

"How far is the island from the airport?" he asked *Ah*-Qiang.

"The ferry is about an hour away, and the ferry ride is thirty minutes long."

Xu Ping nodded.

"You must be a local."

Ah-Qiang smiled at him in the rear-view mirror. "You can tell just from my skin, sir – black, not white like you Northerners. The sun here is deadly. Last time there was a couple who went to the

[82] A prefix that shows familiarity and casualness.

island. The lady was so pale when she came, but when I went to pick them up after ten days, my god, I couldn't even recognize her."

Xu Ping began laughing.

"Is it your first time here, sir?"

"Yeah. We've always lived in X City. This is our first time in the south."

Ah-Qiang grinned. "Then I'll let my uncle know to take you around the island to all the good places."

"Oh? You're not our guide?"

"I don't live on the island. I grew up there, but after my ma passed away my family moved over to the mainland. Only my uncle's family lives on the island. After I help you guys settle in, I still have to catch the ferry back and go back to work at the fish processing plant."

"I thought you were an employee of the travel agency."

"Yeah, but the processing plant's my main job. I just help Meigui out on the side."

Xu Ping smirked. "You're not afraid of your boss deducting your pay?"

"My older brother's the boss. We're all family."

Xu Ping started chuckling.

He reached over and held his brother's hand discreetly. Xu Zheng tilted his head to glance at him before returning to his study of the scenery outside the car.

Ah-Qiang dug out an old cassette and stuck it in. After a bit of static, a sweet, female voice began singing a love song in Min.[83] *Ah*-Qiang followed along, eyes squinting, and began to hum softly.

[83] A dialect traditionally spoken in central and southern parts of Fujian province and northern Guangdong province. Large populations exist in Taiwan due to immigration after the establishment of the Republic of China.

The van sped forth on the highway. The talisman hanging from the rear-view mirror swung back and forth along with the movements of the vehicle.

Outside the windows, the sun was shining bright. Giant coconut trees zipped by. The road transformed into an S before entering a tunnel. It became pitch black all of a sudden, and after some time, a tiny spot of light appeared in the distance, growing bigger by the second.

At the end of the tunnel, Xu Ping saw an endless stretch of cobalt sky and sapphire ocean sparkling with gold.



A two-storey red brick house was built in an apparently foreign, Caribbean style – white walls, tall columns, round arches. A straight driveway paved with pale white concrete extended from the main entrance. On either side were palm trees and shrubs blooming with red flowers, and floral-patterned black metal fencing surrounded the property. There was a private swimming pool, and on one side of the pool was a small door that led to the pure white sand and peacock blue sea.

Xu Ping leaned against the window staring at the building until *Ah*-Qiang drove past without even slowing down.

The house became smaller and smaller.

Xu Ping sat up straight. “That wasn’t the place?”

Ah-Qiang laughed heartily. “Every one of our guests asks the same question. That house is beautiful, ain’t it? Pity that it’s private. We asked. It’s not open to public. The owner comes to the island in the winter.”

Xu Ping smiled.

He rolled down the window a little and let the moist ocean breeze blow in.

The sun was not as strong as it hid behind clouds from time to time. The water was no longer sparkly and gold but rather calm and

so blue that it was green. The sky was also darkening, and soon twilight would set in.

Ah-Qiang cut the engine and turned to the brothers with a grin. “Here we are.”

Xu Ping jumped off.

Before him was a quaint, white cottage with green lawn in its front yard. In the centre was a small but neatly arranged garden. Bougainvillea was blooming brilliantly underneath the windowsills on either side of the entrance. There were two lounge chairs with rice coloured throw pillows on the long porch. There were two cups and a tea pot on the coffee table in front of the chairs. Spider ivy hung from the top of the porch, its thin ribbons swaying gently in the ocean breeze.

Holding his brother’s hand, Xu Ping did not speak for a long time.

Ah-Qiang got out of the car and stopped beside him. “It’s obviously not as grand as the one earlier, and the acreage smaller, too. But I think this house is homier.”

The windchimes on the door tinkled quietly as a lean, elderly man pushed open the green mesh door holding two chains made of fresh flowers. He greeted *Ah*-Qiang, “What took you so long?”

“The ferry had some problems today, and departure was delayed by an hour.” He looked around. “Where’s Auntie?”

“Inside making supper. You know her. Nobody can disturb her when she’s in the kitchen.”

Ah-Qiang started laughing.

“Oh, right. Uncle, let me introduce to you our guest, Mr. Xu. This is my uncle.”

Xu Ping rushed to greet the man. “Mr. Chen.”

“Just call me Uncle Lin.” He draped one flower chain around Xu Ping’s neck and looked at Xu Zheng. “Where’s your wife?”

Xu Ping explained awkwardly, “This is my brother, Xu Zheng. We’re on vacation together.”

“Your brother’s tagging along on your honeymoon?” Uncle Lin wondered.

“No,” *Ah*-Qiang butted in. “It’s just the two of them. Mr. Xu hasn’t married yet, all right?”

Uncle Lin paused before nodding slowly. “Oh. Oh. That’s fine. That’s fine.”

He approached Xu Zheng to give him the other flower chain, so Xu Ping tugged on his brother’s arm, gesturing for him to duck down. Then Uncle Lin put the chain around his neck.

After this, Uncle Lin turned around and made to beat *Ah*-Qiang. “You little shit. How could you get that wrong?!”

Ah-Qiang howled while he dodged about. “It’s not my fault! It’s Meigui’s fault for not clarifying! She told me the guest booked the honeymoon package. How should I know it’s two men!”

“Still makin’ excuses, are you?!” The old man was furious. “Fine! Then you go tell your aunt about it yourself. She’s already bought the ingredients for the next ten days, and she’s already cooking inside.”

“So what? She can cook –” then he stopped looking as though he remembered something.

“We’re just two people,” Xu Ping remarked. “We’ll eat whatever Auntie Lin cooks. It’s no problem.”

“That’s not the problem, Mr. Xu!” *Ah*-Qiang cried out. “You don’t understand. Our guests are always newlyweds, so my aunt cooks these special things for them. You know. For men. To…y’know!”

Forty-nine



"*As music and splendour*

Survive not the lamp and the lute,
The heart's echoes render
No song when the spirit is mute:–
No song but sad dirges,
Like the wind through a ruined cell,
Or the mournful surges
That ring the dead seaman's knell.

–Percy Bysshe Shelley, *When the Lamp is Shattered*

Ah-Qiang took Xu Ping around the house and talked about the amenities before getting ready to leave with Uncle and Auntie Lin.

Xu Ping repeatedly asked them to stay for dinner, but after carefully noting his aunt's expression, he refused right away.

Xu Ping saw them out the door. The three insisted that Xu Ping not go so far, so Xu Ping said goodbye in the yard.

He returned to the house and closed the front door. The next moment, he heard a high yelp from *Ah*-Qiang outside. He stopped, shaking his head with a smile, and then returned to the foyer.

There was a staircase that led to the second floor where there were two bedrooms. To the left of the foyer was the living area and

to the right a connected kitchen and dining area. An open-air deck was attached to the living area, where a small staircase led to the beach.

His brother was waiting for him to join him for supper.

Xu Ping walked over to find two bowls of steamy, hot rice, a steamed fish, stir-fry veggies, and an earthen pot. Xu Ping lifted the lid, and the steam was so strong he could not keep his eyes open. After the steam finally dissipated, he saw white, thick soup. He stirred it with a spoon and found the main ingredient to be some kind of meat accompanied by dong quai, Chinese yam, goji berries and something that looked like tendril-less ginseng. It smelled like fat.



Xu Ping poured a bowl for his brother while he ate stir-fry veggies with rice.

Xu Zheng gulped down the soup very quickly. He smacked his lips together, apparently taking a liking to the soup, and stuck out his empty bowl for another serving.

Xu Ping took the bowl and flipped it over on the table. He said looking downwards, “One’s enough.”

“Oh.” His brother paused before burying his face into his rice bowl.

Xu Ping took apart the fish removing the bones and placed a large piece in his brother’ bowl.

“Try this. Fresh salt-water fish. We don’t get to eat this at home.”

Xu Zheng took a bite.

“How is it?”

Xu Zheng considered for a moment. “No taste.”

It was dark by the time they finished supper. Xu Ping urged his brother to take a shower as he washed the dishes.

But Xu Zheng appeared rather distracted.

After staring out at the ocean from the deck window, he finally turned to his brother. "*Gege*, I want to swim."

Xu Ping placed the last bowl into the drainer to air dry and wiped his hands.

"It's too late. It's dark outside already. It's dangerous to go swimming now."

He watched as the strong ocean wind ruffled the coconut tree leaves.

He lifted the back of his brother' t-shirt up to his nose. "You sweated so much after the long ride today. You're all stinky."

Feeling that he was treated unjustly, Xu Zheng turned around, picked his brother up and stuck his face into his chest. "*Gege* is stinky, too."

Xu Ping giggled.

He rubbed the hair near his brother's temple as he cupped his face. "We've had a long day. Aren't you tired?"

His brother shook his head. He picked Xu Ping up and did a twirl.

"I want to swim."

Xu Ping rapped his on the head. "No."

He dug out a change of clothes and handed it to his brother. "Go shower."

Unsatisfied and upset, his brother trudged away. Soon the sound of water came from the bathroom.

Xu Ping carried the two suitcases upstairs planning to sort their belongings while his brother was in the shower.

He opened the master bedroom door but stopped in his tracks.

The black, carved bed was covered with lily white sheets. A feathery light canopy draped down along the four posters obscuring the scene within. Two wine glasses stood on the dresser, and a bottle of champagne stuck out from a bucket of ice. At the foot of the bed

was the glass door to the second-storey deck. The quiet yet grand ocean lay in the darkness beyond the light beige curtains.

Xu Ping stepped inside and lifted up the white canopy. There was a bouquet of roses wrapped in tissue paper lying on the white embroidered duvet cover.

Xu Ping sniffed the roses and then put them on the dresser.

Underneath the bouquet was a card. He opened it, and it read, “Congratulations on your marriage. Wishing you a hundred years of happiness.”

Xu Ping crumpled the card and threw it on the ground.

He sat on the edge of the bed and bounced. The mattress was very good.

He splayed his hands across the embroidery, feeling in the dark the ups and downs of each stitch.

How many newlyweds has this bed accommodated, Xu Ping wondered.

He opened his arms and fell back onto the bed.

In the dark, he stared at the top of the canopy.

He remembered Auntie Lin walking out from the kitchen as she took off her apron. She said to him with a smile, “Mr. Xu, am I right? Welcome. You made a right choice coming here for your honeymoon. So many couples who came here didn’t want to leave, so I tell them to come here every year. That way they’d sure stay together until the…”

He recalled her face as his brother walked in carrying the luggage, as though she swallowed a duck egg whole.

He smiled.

The men might have been dense, but the women always had an animalistic intuition.

He saw the look of disgust on her face as she eyed him and his brother. Maybe she had seen through it or guessed, but she did not say a word about it.

However, Xu Ping was not angered. He did not feel even a hint of emotional change.

He envied her. She had a happy marriage and a beautiful life, both of which Xu Ping lacked.

As he listened to the water in the bathroom, he thought of his brother and how happy he looked when he twirled him around in his arms earlier.

Xu Ping slowly covered his face with his hands.

Xu Zheng came out of the bathroom with a towel around his neck. "*Gege*."

Nobody answered him.

He looked around the second floor but found no Xu Ping. Then he hopped the steps down to the main floor but still did not see anybody.

The veins on his neck bulged out, and he balled his fists and threw his head back as he howled, "*GEGE*!"

Then he heard a small tink on the window.

Xu Zheng dashed over and ripped the curtains away to see his brother standing barefoot on the beach waving at him.

He opened the deck door and raced down the steps, catching Xu Ping in a hug from behind.

Xu Ping turned his head, smiling. "What's wrong? I just came out to look at the sea."

Xu Zheng kept his head tucked in and would not loosen his grip.

Xu Ping patted his brother's arm. "Shh. Don't talk. Listen."

The waves washed over the beach in gentle swishes.

The brothers did not speak for a long time, but Xu Ping suddenly asked, "*Xiao*-Zheng, do you blame me?"

Xu Zheng lifted his head and asked slowly, "Blame *Gege* for what?"

Xu Ping did not answer.

He kept his gaze on the dark ocean as though to spy on the other shore.

Then he lowered his head and patted his brother's hand.

"Won't you take a walk with me?"

Xu Zheng nodded.

This side of the island was indeed tranquil and deserted. Not a single other person was in sight. The moon hung high in the night sky. The white waves continued to wash over the shore.

His brother ran ahead barefoot, chasing the tide. When it ebbed, he would step closer, and when it rose, he would leap backward.

With his own sandals in hand, Xu Ping leisurely trailed behind his brother.

They left two sets of prints in the sand.

Caught in the fun, Xu Zheng somehow tripped and fell into the water, wetting his bottoms.

Xu Ping flung his shoes away and ran over to help his brother up. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

Xu Zheng shook his head.

Xu Ping put his brother's leg on his lap and began to rub his ankle. "Does it hurt?"

His brother shook his head.

Just when Xu Ping breathed a sigh of relief, his brother let out a loud yelp.

Xu Ping nearly leapt up in fear.

Xu Zheng held up one finger. There was a tiny grey crab attached to it.

As soon as Xu Ping gathered his composure again, he punched his brother.

Completely unaware, Xu Zheng held the finger up to his eyes and studied it very carefully before looking up and asking, "What is this, *Gege*?"

"A crab," Xu Ping replied.

He leaned it to find that the crab was only about the size of three fingertips. Its belly was even translucent.

“Don’t move,” he said as he cautiously pried the claws apart and placed it back onto the sand.

The crab lay motionless for a second before flitting off sideways, burrowing into a small hole in the beach and disappearing.

Only when he crept close to the ground did Xu Ping discover the sand was littered with these holes, but they were not very visible at nighttime.

Excited, Xu Zheng lay down beside his brother and stuck out an index finger to dig one of the holes.

Xu Ping grabbed him.

He glared at him. “Wait.” And he found a stick from some bushes to the side.

“Use this,” he said.

His brother poked the stick into one hole, and before he could pull it back out, a small crab sprang out.

Xu Zheng flipped it onto its back and watched it wave its eight legs around with its white stomach exposed.

He started to laugh happily.

Xu Ping flipped it right side up and watched it run for its life.

He stood up, and after brushing off the sand on his clothes, he pulled his brother up.

His brother still wanted to play some more, so Xu Ping told him as he dusted him off, “These are the small crabs. They’re babies, but if you keep being mean to them, their mom is going to come soon. She’s as big as a house, and her claws can chop your legs off.” He stared at his brother. “Aren’t you scared?”

Xu Zheng stared back dumbly as his face paled, and he nodded.

Smiling, Xu Ping pushed him away. “Then why aren’t you running?”

His brother yelped and dashed away, but he found that his *gege* was not behind him. He jumped as he waved his arms. “Run, *Gege*!”

Xu Ping picked up his shoes and shook them as he replied lazily, “You run. I’m too tired. I can’t run.”

A frustrated Xu Zheng looked left and right before racing back and crouching down with his back to Xu Ping. “*Gege* come on. I carry you and run.”

Xu Ping rubbed his lips together and replied after a long time. “*Gege* is very heavy. You should save yourself.”

Xu Zheng said frantically, “I can carry. I can carry no matter how heavy! *Gege*, come on quick!”

Chuckling, Xu Ping dropped his shoes and leaned forward onto his brother’s back.

Xu Zheng grabbed his legs and started running, his back bent.

Xu Ping hugged his brother’s neck tightly and closed his eyes listening to his heartbeat.

Badum. Badum.

He heard the sound of the waves, and the sound of his brother’s feet on the sand.

“*Gege* is a liar.”

Xu Ping opened his eyes. “Huh?”

“*Gege* is not heavy at all. I can carry *Gege* and run and run and run.”

Xu Ping placed his head on his brother’s back and let his eyes flutter shut.

Not far off was the red-roofed, Caribbean-style cottage they had passed earlier. For some reason, the lights were on.

“*Gege*, did the big crab catch up?”

Xu Ping turned to look. The only things in the night were the white sand, the curved coconut trees, the waves quietly hitting the beach and the stars sparkling like diamonds on navy blue velvet.

“*Gege*, can we stop?”

Xu Ping turned back around.

He held his brother tightly and muttered in a shaking voice, trying to fight back his tears, “Just a bit farther, *Xiao*-Zheng. Just a bit farther.”



Fifty



"*When hearts have once mingled*
Love first leaves the well-built nest;
The weak one is singled
To endure what it once possessed.
O Love! who bewailest
The frailty of all things here,
Why choose you the frailest
For your cradle, your home, and your bier?

–Percy Bysshe Shelley, *When the Lamp is Shattered*

"Hold onto the floatboard. Hold it tight. Don't let go!"

"I'm scared, Dad."

"What're you scared of? I'm right here."

"But it's so deep here…"

"You just have to hold on tight to the board and relax, and you will stay afloat. If anything happens, I'm right here. Now, hold on to the board and kick your feet."

"No, it won't work, Dad."

"It will. Xu Ping, you're a brave boy."

"…*cough*…*cough*… I can't do it, Dad!"

"And you know that after trying just once? Do it again!"

"…Dad, I don't want to learn anymore."

"Do it again!"

"I want to go up. I don't want to learn."

"Your brother's watching you! Do it again!"

"I really don't want to!"

"Even Xu Zheng can swim by now. How can the big brother not know how to swim?"

"Xu Zheng this. Xu Zheng that. It's all about Xu Zheng! What did I do to become his brother?!"

Slap!

"*Gege*."

Xu Ping was lying on a beach chair under the parasol. He lazily opened his eyes and saw his brother standing in front of him, completely soaked in his swim trunks.

"What's the matter, *Xiao*-Zheng?"

"*Gege* fell asleep."

"Yeah." Xu Ping sat up straight and looked around. He found his literature magazine under the chair and brushed the sand off. "I wanted to read for a while, but I just fell asleep. Maybe I've been overworked lately."

"*Gege* was sleeptalking."

"Oh, really?" Xu Ping smiled. "What did I say?"

Xu Zheng shook his head. "Didn't hear."

Xu Ping leaned back into the chair. "I had a dream. Dad took us to the swimming centre to teach us to swim, but I couldn't do it no matter what I did, and I was so scared I just kept crying."

Xu Zheng sat down on the other chair and covered his head with a towel. "And then?"

Xu Ping grinned towards the boundless water. "And then *Xiao*-Zheng appeared, of course! You said, I'll teach you to swim, *Gege*, and you held my hand and led me around the pool. I thought to

myself, *Xiao*-Zheng is the best. I want to be his *gege* for the rest of my life."

His brother lowered his head shyly and asked in a whisper sometime later, "What else?"

Xu Ping chuckled. "Nothing. I woke up from the dream."

"Oh." His brother seemed rather disappointed.

He pulled off the towel and stood up turning his neck and ankles.

"*Gege*, I take you swimming."

Xu Ping shook his head. "You go ahead. I'm going to nap a little longer."

"*Gege* is sleeping all day long."

Xu Ping was caught off guard. "Oh, yeah. It's the heat. It makes me sleepy."

He patted his brother. "You go ahead, but don't swim out too far." He glanced at his watch. "Come back in ten minutes. I already told Auntie Lin not to cook dinner for us. We're going to walk and eat at the restaurant in town."

His brother nodded and put his goggles back on. He turned back to Xu Ping saying, "I'm off, *Gege*."

Smiling, Xu Ping nodded. He watched his brother wade into the seawater against the waves, and then he plunged straight into a wave, his head popping back out a few metres away. Then, he swam out into the distance with nimble, powerful strokes.

The only restaurant on the island looked quite like the dai pai dong[84] in the Hong Kong films – red plastic chairs and white folding tables in the open air with a make-shift roof over head; on the table were a bucket of chopsticks and a roll of toilet paper. Along one wall was a row of cages inhabited by chickens and ducks and other poultry, while the other wall was flanked by a stack of tanks with live

[84] A traditional type outdoors food stand in Hong Kong.

shrimps and crabs and other seafood. The owner had moved the kitchen outside as well and cooked on a stove made from an oil drum. This way, as soon as the customer made the order, the animal could be butchered and fried in the wok.

The menu was very simple – one page laminated – that was it.

The restaurant was a family business, and the waitress was the owner's daughter. She was wearing a white, floral dress and a pair of sponge cake shoes.

It took Xu Ping a while to decipher the owner's squiggly handwriting, but he ordered a fish, a plate of shrimps, a vegetable dish and clam soup.



But the girl did not leave after taking the menu from Xu Ping. "Would you like anything to drink, sir?" she asked Xu Ping but was looking at Xu Zheng.

Xu Zheng stared at the bucket of chopsticks.

Xu Ping sighed quietly. "Do you have beer?"

"Yes. Do you want that chilled?"

"Sure. I'll take a bottle."

The girl would not give up and turned to Xu Zheng. "Would you like a beer too, sir?"

The other customers were starting to stare.

Xu Zheng didn't seem to have heard.

Xu Ping tried to save the situation. "One is enough. I'll share with my brother."

The other patrons seemed to be local islanders and quite familiar with the owner's family. One of the younger ones burst out laughing and called out to the girl in the local tongue. The others all followed in guffaws.

The girl was so indignant that she was shaking and her eyes were brimming. Feeling sorry, Xu Ping was about to stand up and explain, but she threw the menu down, stomped on it and stormed into the building.

Xu Ping sat back in his seat after a long pause.

The girl didn't show up again that night.

It was the girl's mother who brought out the chilled beer. The woman looked about forty or so with a chubby body and generous smile.

She took out a cap opener from her apron pocket, wiped it quickly and opened the bottle with a pop.

White foam surged over the mouth of the bottle.

"Um, is she okay? The lady from just now…" Xu Ping asked secretively.



"Oh, you mean my daughter, *Ah*-Zhi?" the woman laughed heartily. "She's fine. She's fine."

Xu Ping stayed quiet for a second before explaining, "My brother doesn't like talking with people. He didn't mean to embarrass her."

She poured the beer into a plastic cup. "Teenage girls are the worst, always full of temper. She'll get over it in her own time."

She glanced at Xu Zheng. "Oh what do we got here? Sir, your brother is very handsome. He looks like that star on TV."

Xu Ping grinned.

"You enjoy your stay on the island?"

"Yes. We've been here for a couple days now. You could tell?"

"We've lived on this island for all these years. We know every family here, so it's easy to tell who the tourists are."

"That's wonderful," Xu Ping remarked. "Having friends and family around you."

"We older folks think the island's lovely. The food is good. The environment's good. But the young'uns all want to see the world. Like my girl, she keeps saying she wants to be in that talent show on TV, y'know, the one where they wear skimpy clothes and prance around. Says she wants to be a star, make big bucks. Heavens, all

she wants to do is play dress up, and she won't help out with the family things…"

CLANG!

Just as she finished, something shattered in the house.

"Looks like my girl's angry. We'll have to continue later." The woman chuckled apologetically. "The food will be ready soon, sirs."

The taste was average, but the ingredients were as fresh as could be. The owner put them in a bucket for Xu Ping to inspect that they were live before bringing them to the sink to butcher and wash.



Halfway into their meal, the other customers began to depart leaving Xu Ping and Xu Zheng alone. The mother was very warm and came out many times to refill their water and ask about the food. The owner, on the other hand, was much quieter. After turning off the fire in the oil drum, he sat on a stool far off by the light and smoked by himself.

Tiny bugs swarmed around the bright bulb, and from time to time one would bump into the burning glass before flapping away for its life.

The second floor of the concrete building was the living quarters of the owner and his family. Light and what seemed to be the songs of the television show, Super Girl,[85] were coming from the windows.

The breeze gradually cooled. It was different from the winds in the North; moist and salty, it didn't dry the skin.

After finishing the last drop of beer in his glass, Xu Ping went over to the owner to pay.

The owner's wife beamed at him. "Please come again."

A bit tipsy, Xu Ping nodded.

[85] Super Girl, a singing competition that ran from 2004 to 2006.

Afraid that his brother would trip, Xu Zheng stepped towards him and held him by the shoulder, and his brother flashed a smile at him.

Behind them, the owner and his wife began moving the tables and chairs to close for the night.

Most of the shops on the one and only commercial street in town were closed, save a tiny convenience store. The owner had his head tilted back watching the television set on top of a shelf.

It was *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils* produced by TVB[86] which had been rerun for god knows how many times.



"Your Majesty, I, Siu Fung, am Khitay and, in threatening Your Majesty today, have become a sinner of Khitay and can face this world no longer." Then he pierced his own chest.

The owner's breathing hitched dramatically.

Xu Ping halted his brother. "Do you want ice cream?"

Xu Zheng considered for a second before nodding.

Xu Ping looked through the choices in the freezer. "Mister, can you get me two cones?"

The man slid the freezer open while his gaze stayed on the screen.

"Eight yuan."

Xu Ping paid accordingly, and the man passed him an extra packet of fireworks.

"On the house."

Xu Ping took it.

On the counter were an unfinished pack of Baisha[87] and a box of matches. Xu Ping held up the latter and waved it towards the owner.

The man glanced over at him and waved his hand impatiently.

[86] 1997 TV adaptation of the classic book of the same name.
[87] A brand of cigarettes produced in Changsha, Hunan.

The brothers began ripping the packaging on the ice cream cones as they strolled out the store.

Behind them the heroes were bawling around Siu Fung. The actors playing Duen Yu and Hui-juk kept calling “Big Brother!” over and over again until the owner was brimming with tears.

Xu Ping took a bite of the whipped cream on the top and continued down the road, head bent.

“Like it?” he turned to ask his brother.

Xu Zheng nodded.

Xu Ping smiled back.

The moon was exceptionally bright that night. They walked along the beach towards the cottage. The pure moonlight shone down on the sand dancing off in faint flurries.

Xu Ping passed his cone to his brother. “Here.”

“What about you, *Gege*?”

“I don’t like cold things.”

Xu Zheng took it but looked rather perplexed holding a cone in each hand.

Xu Ping bent down and rinsed off the cream in the seawater. He said after straightening, “Let’s sit down and eat. We’re in no rush. Afterwards we can light the fireworks on the sand.”

He pressed down on his brother’s shoulders to get him to sit before fixing his own clothes and lying down beside him.

He looked up at the sparkling stars. The environment was superb on the island; not only was there no air pollution but there was no light pollution either. The summer night sky was clear and clean, and the weakest of stars were visible scattered across the deep blue curtain like miniscule specks of shiny dust.

His brother was munching away.

“*Xiao*-Zheng.”

“Mhm?”

“…do you remember Dad?”

"Yes."

Xu Ping slowly turned his head. "Do you…do you know where Dad went?"

"Dad went travelling just like me and *Gege*."

Xu Ping looked up at the stars for a long time before continuing hesitantly, "Well, actually it's not really like that. Dad…he…" But the words got stuck.

He mustered his courage to try again. "He…"

"Dad went on a trip to a place far, far, far away, so far he cannot contact us. I remember. You said it." Xu Zheng licked a cone.

"Yeah," Xu Ping answered after a silence. "I did say that."

"Do you miss Dad?" Xu Ping asked in a bare whisper.

His brother stopped and turned to look at him.

And after a long time, he spoke: "I just need *Gege*."

Xu Ping could not speak for a while. He stared at the night sky without so much as a blink while his chest rose and fell.

Then he snapped up. "Let's light the fireworks."

Xu Zheng faltered dumbly.

Xu Ping ripped open the packaging to find only two thumb-sized fireworks, and he secured them in the sand about a metre apart from each other.

He beckoned to his brother. "Get away."

Xu Zheng stood up and took a few steps away.

Xu Ping struck a match and lit the fuses of the two sticks.

He ran over to his brother and covered his ears. "It's going to be really loud."

Xu Zheng grinned.

They watched as the fuses burned out, but even long after that there were no explosions.

Xu Ping let his hands fall and said disappointedly, “They probably got damp after sitting around for too long.” He clapped his brother’s shoulder. “Let me take a look.”

He had only taken two steps when the two sticks burst open.

BOOM! CRACKLE!

For Xu Ping, the world spun around and his ears rang, and when he opened his eyes again his brother was on top of him.

“*Gege*.” His brother was cupping his face.

“*GEGE*!” Xu Zheng was getting loud.

“I’m fine.” Xu Ping chuckled. “I’m fine, *Xiao*-Zheng. Just gave me scare, is all.”

His brother hugged him tightly.

Purplish red and blue sparks were shooting out from the two sticks with loud pops. The bits of fire propelled high into the air before tracing a parabola and extinguishing in silence on the inky water.

But neither of the brothers had eyes for that.

Xu Ping lay on the beach hugging his brother’s neck.

Caught in a silent, passionate kiss.

Fifty-one



"*Its passions will rock thee*

As the storms rock the ravens on high;
Bright reason will mock thee,
Like the sun from a wintry sky.
From thy nest every rafter
Will rot, and thine eagle home
Leave thee naked to laughter,
When leaves fall and cold winds come.

–Percy Bysshe Shelley, *When the Lamp is Shattered*

"*Gege*, hurry up!" Wearing an orange lifejacket, his brother waved to him from a yellow rowboat some way off.

Xu Ping pulled a tired smile.

The metal paddle felt heavier and heavier in his hands, and his sore muscles were threatening to quit on him any second now. The orange life jacket was burning under the blazing sun, and it felt like a winter parka in midsummer, making him suffocate.

Dropping the double-ended paddle onto his lap, Xu Ping stopped to rest.

He wanted to shout to his brother to tell him not to paddle out too far, but when he opened his mouth, he found that even his vocal chords were exhausted.

The tiny rowboat beneath him was rocking on the ocean surface dizzying Xu Ping.

He turned towards the beach from which they had departed and saw that it was already far off.

There was a skerry around seven kilometres southwest of the main island that was big enough for two people to sit back-to-back during high tide, and the water there was clearer with more coral and schools of fish. It was a good spot for scuba diving, said Uncle Lin.

Xu Ping raised a hand to his forehead. The golden light reflecting off the water was so strong that he could barely see.

He heard his brother's excited voice. "*Gege*, hurry! This way!"

He looked down at his palms. The water was very close, rocking his little vessel like a baby's cradle. He could see the fishes not far below him, but their dim, quiet world seemed not to be disturbed as they swam idly away, his existence undetected to them.

"*Gege*! *Gege*!"

Xu Ping pulled another tired smile and picked up the paddle.

Xu Ping tied his boat to a rock and plopped down beside his brother, panting. "Water."

Xu Zheng unzipped his backpack and took out a bottle for his brother.

Xu Ping gulped it down so hastily that water was dripping down his cheek.

"*Gege* is so weak."

Xu Ping shot a look out of the corner of his eye but didn't bother to retort. After twisting the cap back on, he passed the bottle back and collapsed onto the rocky islet.

Xu Zheng crouched down beside him.

“What are you staring for?” Xu Ping questioned in a breathless whisper.

“*Gege* has really, really white skin and really, really long legs.”

Not knowing how to respond, Xu Ping turned his face away.

“And a really, really pretty neck.”

Xu Ping hummed a quiet answer.

His brother’s hand brushed his ear and lingered on his neck.

“I want to do it with *Gege*.”

Xu Ping’s face instantly burned, but he eventually regained composure. “Didn’t we do it yesterday?”

“Not the same.” Xu Zheng hugged him from behind sneaking a hand underneath his t-shirt to pinch his nipples. “I really want to do it now.”

His words brushed Xu Ping’s ear making the elder shudder.

Xu Ping turned around. “You rowed for so long. Aren’t you tired? I can barely lift my arms.”

“Yes, but I still want to.”

Xu Ping closed his eyes and sighed. “Can you wait until tonight? Until it’s just the two of us in the room…”

“But I can’t wait, *Gege*.” Xu Zheng interrupted. “I was thinking of you all this time, about your body. But *Gege* rows so slow.”

He planted a kiss on Xu Ping’s neck.

“Can we, *Gege*? There’s nobody here. You did it with me yesterday on the beach.”

He quickly stripped off his t-shirt baring his muscular torso.

Xu Ping stared dumbly at his brother.

Without any sense of shame, Xu Zheng stood up before Xu Ping and unbuttoned his pants taking off his underwear, too. He kicked the garments aside as he exposed his tight thighs and swollen genitals under the sun.

Xu Ping’s mouth opened to say something, but he found his voice was shaking so much he could not.

Xu Zheng knelt down on one knee and took off Xu Ping's sneakers and white socks.

Xu Ping tried to retract his feet, but his brother clutched his ankles.

He studied his *gege*'s toes for a while and then bent down and planted a firm kiss on the back of his foot.

An airplane flew across the cloudless, azure sky drawing a straight white line.

The ocean breeze was swaying lazily while the water lapped at the reef.

A white seagull swooped low.

Xu Ping fluttered his eyelids. He felt hot everywhere except his calves.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and saw his brother's face that had tanned in the past few days and the short stubble along his jaw.

"What time is it?" he asked hoarsely.

His brother pulled him closer into his arms.

Xu Ping lifted his head from his brother's shoulder to find the sun leaning west. The previous blue sky had become lighter like a pair of old, washed jeans.

"The sun's setting…" he remarked quietly.

Xu Ping lowered his gaze and saw that both of them were naked. His brother was sitting against the rocks with him in his embrace.

He jerked his legs to find them submerged from the knee down.

"The tide's rising. Why didn't you wake me up?"

"*Gege* fainted," Xu Zheng answered.

Xu Ping's face reddened and he didn't push any further.

For some reason his brother was very excited today, clutching him by the waist and thrusting into him ceaselessly with a member that seemed larger than usual. His brother didn't show any signs of stopping even after Xu Ping had come on the reef several times. In

the end, Xu Ping was so exhausted and his entrance was so sore and stinging and hungry that tears starting flowing.

He twisted his head back to beg his brother, “Stop, *Xiao*-Zheng, stop it. I can’t take it…”

Upon hearing this, Xu Zheng paused slightly, and Xu Ping felt the member buried inside him growing even bigger and harder before his little brother pushed himself into his body once, and then again and again.

After that, Xu Ping’s memory went black like a screen being unplugged.

“*Gege* is so weak,” Xu Zheng said hugging him. “I’m taller than *Gege*. My arms are thicker. I’m stronger than *Gege*.”

“Okay. Then what?” Xu Ping asked.

“I want to break *Gege*. I want to keep doing it until *Gege* is broken.”

Xu Ping stared back with spooked eyes.

“I’m scared,” Xu Zheng continued.

“*Gege* fell asleep. I hugged *Gege*.” He lightly touched Xu Ping’s eyes, nose, and mouth and then spread his fingers out. “I want to swallow *Gege* whole. Here, here, here…”

He lowered his head and took Xu Ping’s fingers into his mouth one by one.

Xu Ping’s eyes widened and slowly brimmed with tears.

He looked down, and the tears hit the reef.

He grabbed his brother’s hand, spread his fingers out and took them into his mouth.

“You know,” he mumbled. “I do, too, *Xiao*-Zheng.”

The tide slowly submerged the lower rocks as the sun leaned farther west.

Xu Ping faced away from his brother while dressing himself. “Are you hungry?”

But his brother answered a different question, “So hot.”

Then he plunged straight into the water.

Xu Ping yelped, “The tide’s coming in. It’s really deep now. Don’t go in!”

The only response he received was the waves slapping against the reef.

The ripples that Xu Zheng created soon disappeared. The wind kept the surface of the ocean uneven. Birds cawed as they flew towards the island.

Xu Ping stood on the skerry for some time.

Splash!

His brother’s head popped up ten metres away as the man started to paddle back to the skerry.

He clung to the edges of the rocks and stuck out his right hand. “For you, *Gege*.”

It was two clear marbles. Maybe some tourists had lost them while scuba diving.

Xu Ping took them and smiled. “Thank you.”

He grabbed Xu Zheng by the arm and hauled him out of the water before wiping him dry and dressing him.

“We come again tomorrow!” his brother said.

“We have other plans tomorrow,” Xu Ping replied.

“Oh.”

The ten-day holiday passed by in the blink of an eye. It was almost time to say goodbye.

Xu Ping patted the sand off of his brother’s pants and straightened his t-shirt.

He looked up with a smile.

“Do you like it here? This island?”

His brother considered for a while before nodding.

Xu Ping didn’t continue that conversation. He picked up the backpack on the rocks and said, “We’d better go back now. It’ll be harder to tell the direction when it gets dark.”

He untied the hawser, pulled the boat closer and hopped in.

He had put on his life jacket and grabbed his paddle when his brother jumped into his own boat.

“I’ll race you,” he said to Xu Zheng before pushing off the skerry and sliding into the water.



Fifty-two



"*Though leaves are many, the root is one;*

Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth.

–Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Coming of Wisdom with Time*

It was a bit late by the time they returned to the cottage.

Auntie Lin had prepared dinner and left it on the table. She also had left a conventional note saying *Ah*-Qiang would come at noon tomorrow to drive them to the airport.

A tired and quiet Xu Ping ate dinner across his brother. His arms were so sore from rowing that he could barely hold his chopsticks, so he switched to the soup spoon and pushed a few mouthfuls into his mouth.

He stood up and smiled to his brother. "You take your time. I'm going to take a shower."

When the warm water hit Xu Ping's back, he felt a burning sensation.

He reached around and touched the skin there. He probably got burnt by the sun after the afternoon on the skerry.

He didn't pay much attention to it and put on his clothes as usual after the shower.

On the table were empty bowls and plates, and his brother was on the couch watching television.

Xu Ping eased his way over slowly and sat down beside the man.

"What are you watching?"

Xu Zheng was too focused to answer.

Xu Ping didn't mind.

He was wiped and every single muscle was crying out, but he didn't want to sleep.

Every minute, every second, was precious because he could stay with his brother, even if it was watching television together or making small talk.

He diverted some of his attention to the television and the rest to his brother.

He watched as the light from the screen tinted his brother's face.

Xu Zheng turned to him, he smiled back, and Xu Zheng turned back to the screen.

A decade old film, *Scent of a Woman*, was playing. Al Pacino played a blind lieutenant colonel who was dancing with a woman on the dance floor in a restaurant.

"Would you like to learn to tango, Donna?"

"I think I'd be a little afraid."

"Of what?"

"Afraid of making a mistake."

"No mistakes in the tango, not like life. It's simple. That's what makes the tango so great. If you make a mistake, get all tangled up, just tango on."

Xu Ping gently touched his brother's face.

His brother turned to him.

Xu Ping leaned in and kissed his lips.

His brother lowered his head and deepened it.

In the graceful music, Xu Ping shifted away and rested his head on his shoulder.

He didn't know what it was – maybe the gentle music was too sorrowful – his eyes reddened.

He didn't want to let his brother see his tears.

He took a deep breath and composed himself.

The room was dim, and the television screen projected waves of light into it illuminating half of his brother's handsome face.

Xu Ping lifted up his head and smiled at his brother.

He pulled him by the hand up from the couch. "Would you like to dance with me?"

His brother faltered. "I don't know how."

"That's fine," Xu Ping whispered.

He wrapped his brother's arms around his own shoulder.

"Follow my lead."

The white carpet beneath his feet was soft and fluffy like the weeds by the banks, as if it would ensnare whoever stepped foot onto it.

His brother's strong arms were stiffly wrapped around him, and his feet were completely out of sync.

There was probably no worse dancer on the face of the earth.

"*Gege*…"

Xu Ping pressed a finger on his lips.

"Shhh…"

They slowly twirled about the dark living room.

The music gradually faded away, but no one paid any attention to that.

With the warm, salty scent of an adult male, Xu Zheng enveloped Xu Ping in a caccoon.

They spun round and round like the rainy ripples on a lake.

And in that moment, Xu Ping realized that perhaps his fate in existing in this ever-expanding universe, in this infinite time and space, was solely to be with this person right then and there.

Xu Ping cried in silence into his brother's shoulder. The dark hid all signs of it, just as rain fell unbeknownst on the boundless ocean – silently it fell, and silently it disappeared.

Xu Ping awoke from his slumber. The digital clock by the bed told him it was only ten past four in the morning.

He lay in bed. The sky was still black, and he could hear the waves hitting the beach and the ocean breeze whooshing between the coconut tree leaves.

His brother was lying beside him naked and fast asleep. Warm breaths brushed by his ear. Maybe he was having a good dream because his brows were relaxed and his lips were slightly curved.

Xu Ping turned his head and called softly, "*Xiao*-Zheng."

His brother was fast asleep.

Xu Ping turned to his side to face his brother and touched his brother's forehead.

Xu Zheng's lashes fluttered, but the man did not awake.

The window was open, and the breeze sneaked into the room through the tiny crack and brought the white curtains to a delicate dance in the air.

Xu Ping gazed at his brother for a very long time before gently planting a kiss on the corner of his lips.

Carefully, he eased himself off of the bed, and as though he were performing a mime, he picked up the clothes on the floor and dressed himself.

He tucked his brother in and trod out of the room.

He began tidying the clothes in the bathroom, folding each and packing it into the luggage.

Holding onto the railing, he descended the stairs. The couch was practically flipped upside down, and the sink was full of the dirty dishes from last night.

Xu Ping rearranged the couch and then rolled up his sleeves to man the sink.

A white gush of water rushed out from the stainless steel tap creating a big splash.

A tiny, frightened bug fled from the leftover bits of food and circled about unsteadily before disappearing into the darkness.

The first floor was filled with the splashes from the tap and the clinking from the dishes.

Squeak. The tap was twisted shut. Head bent, Xu Ping scrubbed at the counter with a dishcloth, and after he finished he wrung it dry and hung it on the cupboard handle.

He plugged a white plug into the socket, and the kettle lit up.

Head down, Xu Ping waited patiently.

The sink directly faced the small kitchen window, and Xu Ping looked through it to find the sky still dark. But this darkness was a transparent one, as though a sodden calligraphy brush was dipped into water. The light and dark embraced and tore apart but finally merged into one.

Xu Ping knew dawn was coming.

The water in the kettle began bubbling, so Xu Ping turned the kettle off and poured the boiling liquid into a cup.

The white steam rose up like a screen in front of his face, but before anyone could notice it vanished without a trace.

Xu Ping opened the screen door that led to the sea. He took off his shoes and ambled along the old, wooden stairs down to the beach.

Some three seagulls were already flying above, circling near the water and cawing brightly.

Near the edge of the sea, the horizon was dyed a strange pink, and the night faded away as though diluted with water. Blues of different hues began to appear while thin clouds idled by, and before he knew it the sky was light.

Standing on the beach, Xu Ping waited for sunrise.

The air was thick with a bitter, salty scent. Tiny grains of sand crept underneath his toenails. His shirt flapped loudly in the wind.

Xu Ping couldn't remember the last time he watched a sunrise. He had been busy all his life, waging a war against himself, against the world, everyday – busy going to work, busy getting off work, busy taking care of his brother, busy buying groceries and preparing meals, and busy struggling to stay alive.

He lived his life like a whirlwind but now realized he never had taken time to be a human being.

Slowly he lowered his head into his hands.

At one point in his life, he stopped remembering the past. He only locked it in a chest deep inside like spare tapes.

His life had died in its womb before it could actually begin, for he had dreams in the past and they, like blossoms that came forth from the soil of his heart, were crushed by the wheels of destiny before he could ever water them properly.

His eighteenth year was pitch black, and even locked away in a chest it was a fearsome beast that constantly morphed shapes with darkness as its medium.

Someone once told him it was just bad luck. He struggled to piece himself back together but in that process lost many things. He no longer believed fate and held no hope.

He lived after the catastrophe but only just. He lived for the sake of staying alive and supporting Xu Zheng and himself.

He thought his life would end in toilsome dreariness, but even this lowly thought was going to be taken from him.

The sun rose above the horizon. A golden light, one that nobody could face directly, shot out in all directions chasing away the darkness. And in that moment, the world seemed brand new.

Xu Ping reached out his hands and watched the dawn light shine on his palms and the grooves grow like branches across the surface. He slowly flipped his right hand over and watched the light dance off of his hand like little elves.

The waves washed over his ankles again and again leaving white foam on the fine sand. Small shells that had been pushed up onto the shore lay trapped in the wet sand like pale white footprints.

A tiny crab shuffled out from a hole in the sand, shook the sand off from its shell and raced for the water. In a few waves' time, it was gone.

The last shrouds of darkness soon vanished, the sky now a pure baby blue with white flowing clouds.

The sky was completely light now. His brother would soon wake up, and they would eat the last breakfast and clean the dishes. And then *Ah*-Qiang would come pick them up with that white van of his, gladly carry their luggage for them and drive them to the airport.

Xu Ping knew that what he ought to do was walk back to the cottage and open the door to the only bedroom on the second floor where his brother was sleeping. He should sit on the bed and put his hand on his face so that he wouldn't be upset from not seeing him upon waking.

But that was not what he did.

He stripped his shirt and pants and threw them far up on the beach.

He wanted to take one last swim by himself before his brother awoke.

He took a deep breath and dove into the ocean.

He felt the seawater gently lifting him up.

He tilted his head to the side and began to paddle.

Xu Ping did not know where he was going or how far he wanted to go, but he just kept swimming.

The waves surged around his body, as if the whole world was trying to stop his advance.

Xu Ping popped his head above the water and took a big breath.

He could smell the light sting of the seawater which burned his back.

His memories surged back as well, of his dad, of his brother, but they shattered into nothingness before he could focus his mind on them.



He recalled his brother learning to speak very late and all the times he called him "*Gege*" while pulling the edge of his shirt; he recalled his dad leaving the city for work and the five-year-old Xu Zheng sitting on a mazha waiting intently for the nine-year-old Xu Ping to start cooking; he recalled his brother getting acute enteritis in the middle of the night, his taking him to the hospital on the back of his bicycle, and Xu Zheng lying on the cot holding his hand whispering, "*Gege*, it hurts."

He gave his all trying to protect Xu Zheng, to give him a simple but warm home, so that he would not get hurt by the elements. But all of this was going to collapse when he fell to his illness. Who would protect him from then on? Who would care for him, cook for him when he was hungry, or take him to the doctor when he got sick?

Xiao-Zheng, *Gege* is probably going to die soon.

A wave rushed towards Xu Ping, and he ducked into the water before popping back up. He wiped the water from his face and turned back to find himself several hundred metres from the shore.

The white cottage stood in silence against the morning light. The beach was deserted.

What am I doing, Xu Ping thought desperately, what should I do?

He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He felt as though his insides were broken down by the angst, but he couldn't get a single syllable out of his mouth.

He snapped around and swam farther out to sea.

He had never begged any person or any entity for anything. He didn't believe in God or Buddha; he didn't revere the demons and spirits. Even during the days of physical turmoil in prison, he had grit his teeth and borne through it by himself. But here and now, Xu Ping truly wished that someone or some entity could listen to his plea, come to him, give unto him hope and courage and guide him through this treacherous milestone.



It was then that Xu Ping felt a tugging pain that ripped through his thigh as if someone had torn open his muscles and were pulling his tendons out.

To his surprise, he sank beneath the waves and drank mouthfuls of saltwater before he could make his way up again.

He kept rising above and falling below the surface. Just when he would call for help, the seawater would shove his words back into his mouth.

"I don't want to die. I want to live! *Xiao*-Zheng needs me. I need to live!" he thought frantically while he struggled to stay afloat.

His right leg was stinging and weighed him down like a stone.

His arms flapped furiously as he bobbed up and down.

His arms felt like rocks that he increasingly had trouble lifting.

Water gushed in through his nostrils scorching his lungs, and his body temperature dropped.

There seemed to be something at the bottom of the sea beckoning to him.

He reached out in attempt to break the surface once more.

Eyes open, Xu Ping sank lower and lower.

I'm going to die, he thought.

He saw the bluish green surface, so bright and clear. Colourful fish skitted about the coral reefs not a far ways off, not at all fazed by this giant thing that was drowning. Looking up from the bottom, the surface of the sea looked like translucent turquoise refracting tiny sparkles. The sun had risen.

He thought of his brother fast asleep in the cottage and how much he wanted to give him one last kiss.

"*Xiao*-Zheng."



Fifty-three



“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and prosecute you,

That you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

–Matthew 5:43-45

“*Xiao*-Zheng.”

Xu Zheng jerked awake.

He sat up from the bed, head plastered with sweat, heart beating a mile a minute on the verge of popping out of his chest.

He panted for a long time with his hand pressed to the left side of his chest and then called out, “*Gege*.”

Nobody answered.

The window was opened just a crack, and the morning breeze flapped the curtains rather loudly while the sunlight beamed down.

The side where his brother had lain was empty, and the quilts all covered him. All the clothes that had been carelessly tossed aside

amid the rush last night had been picked up and folded into neat piles on the bed.

Xu Zheng felt assured when he saw the clothes.

He fell back into the bed again, filling his nose with the scent of his brother lingering on the pillow.

He had a dream – Xu Zheng almost never dreamed, for he usually fell dead asleep – the first half of which had already blurred away so that he only remembered rowing a boat with his brother somewhere. The weather was wonderful, and blooming lotus flowers were all around them. His brother spoke softly to him, and he felt a full happiness even in the dream. He had his head bent helping his brother shuck lotus when his brother gently called, "*Xiao*-Zheng." He looked up, and his brother gave him a light kiss, and he felt something warm inside him overflowing ceaselessly, filling every limb and bone. Blushing, he called back with a stutter, "*Gege*," and Xu Ping grinned at him. The next thing he knew the dream shattered like a broken mirror.



Xu Zheng jerked awake from the dream.

He didn't know why he would have such a dream, and this made him a little anxious. He wiggled around the bed while burying his face in Xu Ping's pillow and taking big breaths.

He used to always get scolded by his brother for doing this because the pillow was very dirty, but Xu Zheng never corrected this behaviour. He thirsted for his brother's scent like an opium addict, and he couldn't stop himself from licking Xu Ping's neck like a big puppy when they were in bed.

At that thought, Xu Zheng felt his body heat up.

He grabbed a t-shirt and clumsily slipped it on and then stuck his legs into his shorts.

First he went to the bathroom to take a leak and then he hopped down the stairs looking for Xu Ping.

Xu Ping wasn't in the house. The luggage was lined up nicely in a corner of the corridor. There was a cup of steaming water on the kitchen counter.

Xu Zheng took a look around but didn't find Xu Ping.

He opened the mesh door that led to the sea. The beach was empty except for two pieces of clothing.

Xu Zheng picked them up and sniffed. They still had his brother's scent and heat.

"*GEGE*!"

He shouted. It reached far away frightening two birds scavenging on the beach. They flapped their wings and soared into the sky.

Xu Zheng felt his limbs turn cold. He lifted up his arms and saw goose bumps crawling all over.

Xu Ping felt as though he were walking down a dark tunnel.

But instead of fear or horror, he felt peaceful.

He didn't know where he was or where he was headed. It was as if all the negative emotions were sucked out from within, and he felt light and floaty. Even the darkness made him feel joyful.

He walked towards one end of the tunnel where there was dazzling sunlight. It made longing grow in his chest, as though something were beckoning to him.

He approached it.

There were two silhouettes in the light, a man and a woman, and glowing colours surrounded them, their faces blurry but pristine.

Feeling absolutely at ease and joyful, he stood before them and called out softly, "Dad. Mom."

He recalled the many things that he thought he had forgotten, and they became clear again. "Am I dead?" he asked.

The two figures only looked back at him.

For some reason, Xu Ping didn't feel scared at all. Everything was peaceful and good in this world. No pain. No worries. It was like heaven.

He looked back at his life and did not feel regret; he had fulfilled his duty.

He smiled. "Take me."

He stepped forward to enter that light, but he heard a heart-wrenching scream from afar, "*GEGE*!"

He faltered and looked behind himself.

The shout penetrated the shrouds of darkness and beat against the drum of his heart.

"*GEGE*!"

"*GEGE*!"

Xu Ping felt excruciating pain as the voice seemed to tear his soul apart.

The next thing he knew, tears were flowing.

His eyelids felt heavy. He was soaked and cold, completely immobile.

Someone was pressing hard on his chest and then pinching his nose and blowing into his mouth.

After blowing for some time, the man pressed his ear against his chest and then began pushing on his chest again. "Don't do this, Xu Ping." His voice was shaking. "Don't do this."

It sounded familiar to Xu Ping, but he couldn't remember whose it was.

The man repeated CPR a few times, but Xu Ping was still lying on the sand, eyes closed and motionless save for the shallow breaths that were as good as none. He began choking. "You come back right now, Xu Ping! I saw you crying just now! You're conscious, aren't you?! Come back! Come back!"

The man sounded so hurt that Xu Ping felt the pain, too.

He wanted to move a finger but found his body was constrained by invisible chains.

Cupping Xu Ping's face, the man continued assisted breathing, but Xu Ping didn't wake up. He hugged his head and made a strange gasping sound.

Xu Ping thought he was laughing but soon felt warm raindrops on his face.

"All my fault…all my fault…"

Xu Ping had no idea what was going on.

He tried his best to open his eyes to see who this weird person was, but the next moment he felt the man's lips on his own.

The man deepened the kiss until Xu Ping felt as if his tongue was being eaten.

Then – *WHAM* – he heard a fist hit cheek bones.

The man flew away.

He heard his brother's angry roar as he charged towards the man to engage in battle. The two rolled around the sand.

Xu Zheng was swallowed by rage.

He had swum out many times but had not found his brother which made him more frustrated than ever. Maybe it was because he had been abandoned once by Xu Ping when he was young. Xu Zheng could still remember a bloody Xu Ping sitting on the ground telling him, "Just go die. I don't ever want to see you again." Despite the amount of time that had passed, there was still a part of Xu Zheng that believed he was not good enough for his brother, and one day his brother would leave him without any notice like this, taking away all the light in his world and leaving him alone in the darkness.

Xu Zheng remembered that feeling, and he feared nothing more than it.

Dripping, he returned to the shore, despair, anger and fear roaring within him. He didn't understand how all of this happened. His brother had been very good to him lately, doing many things with him that he could've never imagined. His brother opened his body to him. He could kiss him, hug him, with such intimacy and joy that Xu Zheng felt like he would explode like a bloated balloon. But the next thing he knew, *Gege* disappeared.

He furrowed his brows and clenched his jaws, the muscles on his face trembling.



And in that instant, he spotted his brother lying on the beach, eyes closed as though in slumber, and then a stranger bent over and kissed him.

For a few seconds, Xu Zheng stared bewildered at the sight, his muscles frozen solid. Many thoughts flashed through his mind, but they were messy and convoluted. Some not even Xu Zheng understood, but they all became one – *Gege* didn't leave me. *Gege* has been stolen from me.

Half of the anxiety, fear and despair turned into rejoicing and the other half into rage.

Gege didn't leave me. *Gege* has been stolen from me.

He lunged for the man's neck and swung a fist at his face, sending blood spraying out of his nose.

When the man tumbled away from Xu Ping, there was still a look of amazement as he stared at Xu Zheng as though he couldn't believe he had just been hit.

Xu Zheng stepped over his brother and grabbed the man's shoulder, about to land another punch. The man snapped back and locked Xu Zheng's wrist, joining him in a bout in the sand.

Ignoring the man, Xu Zheng pushed him down and planted punch after punch on his face.

The man was strong, and fists scraped over his eyes, drawing bloody tears from the corner of his eye.

But he felt no pain.

He felt the fire in his chest was about to boil his blood. His temples were pounding, and his head was blank except for one thought:

KILL HIM! KILL HIM!

They rolled around the sand locked in battle. The man's fury seemed to have been triggered as well, and he fought back with a hundred and ten percent.

They eyed each other with wild, hatred-filled eyes, each plotting the murder of the other.

Never had Xu Zheng been this furious. He felt such fear at the thought of his light being taken away and hidden by this man, and of him living the rest of his life in pain, that he shook at his core.

He howled like an angered bear and leapt to strangle the man and push his head into the sand.

The man struggled away from the ground and spat out a mouthful of sand. "Xu Zheng!" he yelled hoarsely.

Xu Zheng clenched his jaws and continued hitting his face with no regards.

"Xu Zheng, your brother's dead."

Xu Zheng's right fist stopped above the man's nose, faltered for a second or two, and landed heavily.

The man coughed out blood.

Xu Zheng picked the man up by the collar and slammed him down again.

The man stared at him and whispered, "Xu Ping's dead."

Punches rained down on him, and it was as if he had given up on resistance. He curled up in the sand and hid his head behind his arms in silence.

After god knows how long, the assault ceased. A sweat soaked Xu Zheng began panting roughly, hands on his knees.

The man continued coughing intermittently on the ground, his lungs making a worn, deflated sound.

Xu Zheng slowly straightened himself, stepped over the man and came to Xu Ping.

"Rise and shine, *Gege*."

He gently shook Xu Ping's arm.

"Let's go home, *Gege*."

Xu Ping kept his eyes shut.

A little hurt, Xu Zheng chewed his bottom lip and considered his words.

"I was wrong, *Gege*. I shouldn't fight. Don't be mad at me."

He grabbed Xu Ping's hand.

"Let's go home, *Gege*."

His only answer was the sound of the waves sweeping the beach.

The man started sobbing on the sand.

As though unaware, Xu Zheng stared dumbly at the sand before suddenly kneeling down and kissing Xu Ping on the cheek.

Carefully, he studied his brother's expression like a bad dog trying to please his owner.

"Is it 'cause you're tired, *Gege*?"

Xu Ping didn't answer.

Xu Zheng lay down beside his brother. He turned to face him.

"You're tired, *Gege*. I sleep with you for a bit."

He nudged Xu Ping a little closer to himself and tucked his own arm underneath his head.

Xu Ping's face was deathly pale. His lashes were tightly laced. Only his lips were slightly pink, but combined with the other things it only seemed inauspicious.

Xu Zheng felt that his brother was cold, so he took off his t-shirt and laid it on Xu Ping.

He lay back down and touched Xu Ping's lashes.

So long.

Lovingly, he planted a kiss on his brother's eye.

"Sleep well, *Gege*. We'll go home when you wake up."

The sky gradually darkened, the heavy clouds blocking the sun. Black clouds were gathering at the edge of the sea like the military ready for battle. Faint claps of thunder sounded from within the thick veil like war drums. What were missing were the strikes of lightning across the sky, and then the fat drops of rain would be unleashed and wreak havoc upon the world.



"Get up," the man was now standing beside Xu Zheng and ordering coldly. "Let go of Xu Ping."

He tried to reach for Xu Ping's arm, but Xu Zheng opened his eyes and swatted him away.

He sat up and stayed defensive in front of his brother, glaring at the other man like a murderous wolf.

After a period of silence, the man spoke, "He's dead, Xu Zheng."

Immediately, as though his own words had stabbed him, he raised his head and trembled as he tried to hide his teary eyes.

Xu Zheng only stared back warily.

"He had a terminal illness. He came here with you only because he wanted to make some happy memories with you in his last days."

As he spoke, he tried to reach around Xu Zheng to get to Xu Ping.

Xu Zheng swatted his hand away.

"He's always been this way. He looked smart, he was good at school, but really he's a stupid fool who didn't know to do things another way."

The man tried again, but Xu Zheng kicked him down.

"All these years, I couldn't come back, so I asked people to keep an eye on him. I did something terrible to him, and it's haunted me like a nightmare. I've been thinking these years that I'd stand before him when I had the fame and power and ask for his

forgiveness. I'd give him things he'd never even dreamt of…the money, the status, the life…"

He struggled to climb to his feet. He dusted off the sand on his face and stepped towards Xu Zheng.

"Do you know how it feels to go to school in the day and work at night, only sleeping three hours every day? How it feels to work intensively for twenty long hours and get sent to the hospital for epileptic spasms? How it feels to bribe, threaten, blackmail and betray anyone you could betray just to climb up the ladder? How it feels to go against your sexual orientation and marry a woman you feel absolutely nothing for, and put on a facade of love every day in front of her rich father just to get funding?!"

He stood up tall in front of Xu Zheng.

"You don't know anything," he whispered. "You retard."

With one kick he dislodged Xu Zheng, and then he dove for his neck. Xu Zheng began writhing.

He dodged Xu Zheng's flailing arms, and as he applied more force around his neck, he said with narrowing eyes, "You were born as his brother. He loved you, cared for you, gave up everything for you, but what have you ever done for him?! You were born a retard who can't even take care of himself. What makes you think you can keep him all to yourself? You're not good enough for him!"

Xu Zheng couldn't breathe, and his face was bright red. The man's hands were like cuffs around his neck, and he waved his arms trying to knock him away, but the man evaded them easily.

"I'd finally…finally…" he began choking up. "I learned he had cancer and thought I'd take him away this time, get him cured and give him the best life. I kept telling myself, just hang on, just hang on, I'll see him after your vacation ends and tell him I'm sorry, tell him I've missed him all these years, tell him I've contacted the best doctors who will definitely cure him, but…but…"

Xu Zheng felt a few drops of something warm falling on his face.

"It's too late. It's too late… Xu Ping's dead. He was so weak, but he chose to go swimming so early in the morning. He must have done it on purpose. Aren't you his brother? Didn't you treasure him and love him so much? Why didn't you keep an eye on him?! WHY?!"

The hands around his neck broke away at last. The man took a step back and fell back on the sand wailing with his hands on his forehead.

"You should just go die. Go die for Xu Ping and bring him back. He was so good to you. If you really see him as your brother, then go take his place!"

Holding his neck coughing, Xu Zheng slowly sat up and stared at the crying man before turning to Xu Ping.

He bent over and touched foreheads with Xu Ping.

He stared at his pale face and blurted, "*Gege*."

He gave him a push.

"Get up, *Gege*."

He shook his shoulder.

"Wake up, *Gege*."

The other man looked up at Xu Zheng.

Xu Zheng shook Xu Ping. "Get up, *Gege*."

"*Gege*."

He abruptly smacked Xu Ping across the face.

The other man went through shock and fury in a few seconds and quickly leapt up to stop him.

"What are you doing?! He's dead already!"

"He is not!" Xu Zheng retorted in a roar.

"He is not dead. *Gege* is right here. I hear him talking to me." He tilted his head to listen carefully. "He tells me, don't be afraid. He asks me to wait for him."

The other man widened his eyes and slowly released Xu Zheng.

Xu Zheng leaned down and called quietly, "*Gege*."

He kissed one cheek and then the other.

The other man seemed unable to watch this scene and turned away, eyes raw and lips pursed.

Xu Zheng grabbed his brother's hand and kissed every finger before placing the hand against his own face.

"*Gege*, I'm not afraid," he enunciated clumsily. "I'm here, not going anywhere."

"I'm waiting for you, *Gege*."

He leaned in and kissed Xu Ping's lips.

"*Gege*…"

His voice wavered at the end like that of a hurt child.

His hair stuck out messily, and his face was black and blue.

With an arm he wiped away the tears that suddenly broke free, again and again.

"I love you, *Gege*." He choked through the words that he had wanted to say. "Don't leave me behind, *Gege*."

A single tear rolled out of Xu Ping's eye, across his temple and into the sand.

The tears kept flowing one after another and painted a dark circle on the beach.

Xu Zheng was still crying. It was the first time he ever shed tears.

Behind him a man was fumbling with his cell phone.

"…ambulance…yes, goddamn it, tell them I said so. Get a helicopter here this instant…"

Fifty-four



“Love suffers long *and* is kind;

Love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;

Does not behave rudely, does not seek its own,

Is not provoked, thinks no evil;

Does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

–1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Xu Ping awoke from his slumber.

The sky outside the window was azure with bits of lazy clouds floating about, and he heard the distant din of primary schoolers during physical education class. The sharp cries and giggles sounded gentle and far away but also strangely energetic after being filtered by the many layers of glass.

Xu Ping felt as though he had a wild, illusory dream, and he woke up disoriented, not sure of where he was or even what day it was.

A young nurse looked up from her magazine.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

She laid the magazine down and checked the drips.

Hugging the quilts, he slowly sat up.

"Where am I?"

"K City Hospital."

K City? Xu Ping wondered. Why was he there?

After staying quiet for a long time, he asked sharply, "Where's my brother?"

The nurse faltered and looked at him with a confused expression.

Xu Ping's heart skipped a beat.

"My brother, he's really tall and bulky…" He began gesturing in a panic. "He's not that sharp, and he doesn't like to talk…h-he…"

He was in such a panic that he began stuttering.

Pfft. The nurse couldn't stifle her giggle.

"The big dummy, right? He was brought in here along with you. Kept holding onto you calling "gege." Don't worry. The doctor gave him a shot to calm him down. He's sleeping next door."

Just as the knot in his stomach settled, he became a bit angry.

"H-how could you joke about that?!"

"Look at you," the nurse said carelessly. "I was just playing with you."

She looked over and eyed Xu Ping's expression, and then she pursed her lips and rolled up her white sleeves. "Your brother was like a raging bull that wouldn't listen to anyone or let anyone near you without engaging in battle. Look, he gave me these bruises."

After Xu Ping saw the blue marks on her arm, the anger at being teased quickly turned to massive amounts of guilt.

"I'm sorry, my brother is–"

"It's fine," she interrupted him good-naturedly. "Do you want see him? I'll go get him for you."

Xu Ping considered it and shook his head. "No, thanks. Let him sleep."

He carefully lifted the bedding to get off the bed.

"What do you want to do?"

Xu Ping was a little slow. “Use the toilet?”

The nurse pulled out a urinal from under the bed.

“Here, let me help you.” And she went for Xu Ping’s pants.

Surprised and embarrassed, Xu Ping immediately retreated while blocking with his hands, his ears flushing bright red.

He was about to shout, “Don’t come closer!” when someone coughed from behind the nurse.

Putting on her work face, the nurse placed the urinal down and left.

Blushing, Xu Ping redid his hospital pants and sat back in the bed.

Two men had come in, the first one wearing frameless glasses and a white coat.

Holding a patient file in his hand, he eyed Xu Ping, smiled and turned around to talk to the man behind him who was in black.

The two spoke quickly, exchanging medical terms and English words. Listening to them was like viewing flowers through fog.

He leaned back on the head board, took his time to button his hospital gown and then flattened out the folds in his quilt.

There was a vase on the bedside table with blooming pink carnations.

The sun was shining brightly, peeking in between the slits in the blinds while millions of dust motes danced in the rays.

Xu Ping listened carefully. *Brrrrrriiing* – the chime was ringing in a school some distance away, and all the kids rushed to the corridor and field from their classroom, cheering and laughing, without a care in the world and full of spirit and hope.

Xu Ping felt strangely tranquil, maybe even relaxed and cheerful, as though a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders relieving him of any more confusion and trouble.

He even felt like humming a light tune.

He reached and drew the blinds. Cars and pedestrians were going to and fro along the street partly hidden by trees. He spotted a young couple kissing at the intersection, a housewife haggling with a street vendor over peaches, and a yellow dog curled up under the shade in front of a shop, snoozing.

He heard the door closing with a quiet click and turned around. The doctor had left.

The remaining man was wearing a black knit turtleneck and black suit jacket and pants. He pulled out a chair and sat down beside the bed.

On his face were bruises that still had not faded. His hair was short and clean, and the faint minty scent of shaving cream hung about.

He didn't speak first but instead tucked the quilts in for Xu Ping.

He appeared wealthy but quiet about it, and his temples were peppered with grey.

"Hello," he said. "Xu Ping."

Xu Ping's operation was scheduled for a Wednesday.

Huang Fan had long since flown back to New York.

The surgeon in charge, Dai, was specially hired by Huang Fan. Not yet forty years old, the man was exceptionally skilled. Dr. Dai had a strange personality and didn't like to talk, and his hobby was fruit sculpture. Xu Ping had seen him carve a man's face into an apple with incredible speed and then snap off its nose with one bite and munch away – quite creepy.

He Zhi came with his fiancée, Wei Ying, to visit him on the day of the surgery.

Xu Ping was trying to figure out the consent form with his brother.

"Does it have to be my brother?"

"Do you have any other family members?"

“No.”

“Then your brother must sign,” Dr. Dai answered tonelessly while filing his nails.

“In what world?” He Zhi demanded. “His brother’s sick. If it’s for the fees, I can sign for him.”

“Will you be responsible if he dies?” Dr. Dai asked.

After so many years in the criminal department, He Zhi’s temper had grown fiery, and his knuckles itched when someone dared to speak to him like that. He wanted to gift the man with a faceful of blood, but Wei Ying stopped him.

“Don’t worry, it’s not certain that he will die. As long as he isn’t pushed out of the operation room within half an hour, the chances of survival will double.”

“And what if he comes out within half an hour?” He Zhi’s face darkened as he asked.

“Then it means the cancer has spread to the rest of my body, and there’s no way to excise it,” Xu Ping answered calmly.

Dr. Dai let out a few grunts as agreement.

He Zhi thought of Xu Ping’s old man, and his face turned more sour.

“Well, there’s actually another possibility that’s more dangerous and that is, if the operation lasts longer than six hours, the blood loss will be too much for the body.” As he explained he massaged his fingers one by one. “But with my skill, this will not happen under normal circumstances.”

He glanced at the wall clock. “Hurry. The operation begins in half an hour. I don’t want to be too worn out. I still have plans this evening.”

He Zhi wanted nothing more than to strangle him then and there.

He Zhi turned to Xu Ping. “How do you feel?”

Xu Ping smiled. “Pretty good.”

Seeing his childhood friend's smile, He Zhi felt a sharp pang, and tears threatened to overflow despite his steel-cold heart from many years of police work.

He tried his hardest to keep his lips shut.

It was Wei Ying who spoke next. "Xu Ping, focus on recovery. Afterwards come attend our wedding."

Xu Ping was surprised. "Isn't it coming up soon?"

"We delayed it," Wei Ying replied. "He Zhi has a big case on hand. My dad said work's important, so we'll get married after he cracks the case."

He Zhi shot a glance her way and reached for her hand behind their backs.

And they shared a smile.

Xu Ping caught it but smiled back. "Okay."

He beckoned to his brother. "*Xiao*-Zheng, come."

He flipped to the last page of the booklet, pointed to the signature line and stuck the pen in his brother's hand.

"Write your name here."

Xu Zheng had been in a fight with his brother over the past couple of days. The reason was that Xu Ping didn't wake him up as soon as he came to, instead locking himself up in the room and yapping away with that bad man.

Annoyed, he flung the pieces of paper around.

"What is this?"

The room became quiet. Even Dr. Dai stopped filing his nails.

All eyes were on Xu Ping.

"A life contract," Xu Ping said with a squinty smile. "After you sign this, my life will be yours."

Overjoyed, Xu Zheng lunged forward and painstakingly wrote down his name.

Without looking at it, Xu Ping passed it to Dr. Dai.

The doctor took one look at it and found that the two characters were extremely proper.

"Your brother doesn't seem like an idiot if you just look at his writing, eh?"

Xu Ping didn't even look up. "My brother is a genius. It's just that idiots can't see it."

A vexed Dr. Dai grudgingly explained the surgical procedure and slammed the door as he left.



The nurse began shooing people out.

He Zhi clasped Xu Ping's shoulder. "We'll all be waiting outside." Instantly, his eyes reddened.

"Keep an eye on my brother," Xu Ping mouthed.

He Zhi nodded and mouthed back, "Don't you worry."

He Zhi tugged on Xu Zheng's arm, but the younger man wouldn't let go of his brother.

Xu Ping rubbed the head that was glued to his shoulder and urged gently, "*Xiao*-Zheng, go out with *Da*-Zhi."

Xu Zheng shook his head.

"Where are you going, *Gege*? I go with you."

Rubbing his short hair, Xu Ping only chuckled.

The sharp Wei Ying dragged He Zhi out so the brothers could share a private moment together.

Even the nurse was forced to put down her tray and leave under He Zhi's glare.

Xu Ping cupped his brother's face and planted kisses on his lips again and again.

Eyes shut, he held Xu Zheng tightly, and Xu Zheng hugged him just as tightly.

He put his lips right by his brother's ear.

"*Xiao*-Zheng, I'm going to tell you a secret," he whispered. "I'm going to meet with someone very important very soon. He is

all-knowing and all-seeing. He manages the time of everyone in the world. He can see every single thing every single person does, but nobody can see him."

Xu Zheng's shoulders stiffened.

"Now, very soon someone will push me into a room with a red light outside. *Xiao*-Zheng, you must not be afraid. I'm going to meet that person. He is very strict but also very kind. I'm going to have a talk with him, like two good friends." He paused. "*Xiao*-Zheng, I need you to do a favour for me. I need to you sit outside like a good boy. Don't make noises, and don't cause trouble. That person has a very unpredictable temper. He hates noise and only likes quiet. I want to ask him for something very important. It's something so precious that all the money in the world cannot buy it."



Xu Zheng nodded solemnly, but his eyes showed his reluctance.

Smiling, Xu Ping kissed his brother on the forehead.

"Don't worry. That person is the fairest and kindest person in the world," he said. "Wait for me. I will be back very quickly."

Dr. Dai personally walked Xu Ping into the operation room.

Lying on the gurney, Xu Ping said to He Zhi, "Don't be stingy. If my brother gets tired of waiting, buy him a popsicle to ease the boredom."

He Zhi was already very upset, and now he just wanted to beat someone up.

Xu Ping waved to everyone with a smile.

A bunch of doctors and nurses accompanied him into the room.

The operating table was very cold. The surgical light switched on with a *click* and made Xu Ping shut his eyes.

He quietly waited for the anaesthetic to take effect.

Dr. Dai pulled down his blue medical mask and grinned, "Are you scared?"

Xu Ping thought about it but eventually shook his head.

“Oh?” Dr. Dai cocked a brow.

“I died once. It didn’t feel scary, rather it was peaceful. I saw my deceased family members–”

“Scientifically speaking,” the doctor interrupted. “those are illusions caused by chemical components in your brain.”

Smiling, Xu Ping shook his head.

“I know you don’t believe it.”

“Believe what? Your nonsense?”

Xu Ping turned to the man and stuck out a finger at his heart. “I can see, Dr. Dai, you have a hole here. You’re missing someone.”

The doctor’s fingers trembled, his knife nearly slipping out.

He frowned and growled through gritted teeth, “Who told you?! Was it Huang Fan?!”

Xu Ping only chuckled.

“That asshole!” spat Dr. Dai. “I’m doing such a big favour for him, and he fucking betrays my secret!”

“He didn’t say anything,” Xu Ping remarked lazily.

The doctor was in disbelief. “Then how did you find out?!”

“I can see,” Xu Ping answered.

Dr. Dai was left hanging.

“There is one thing I find strange. Judging by Huang Fan’s attitude in the past, he would have taken you to the States no matter what, so why did book a ticket for himself after two hours with you in a room?” Then he asked Xu Ping, “So, what did you talk about?”

Xu Ping blinked at him. “What’s the name of the person you miss?”

The doctor choked out of frustration. “Why the hell do you care who I miss?! No, wait! I don’t miss anyone!” He grabbed Xu Ping. “Tell me now, what did you discuss?”

“A secret for a secret,” Xu Ping shut his eyes and breathed.

Then the drugs kicked in, and he was out.

August the following year, He Zhi and Wei Ying married.

The wedding was held at a church with some history in the old part of town.

After surgery, chemotherapy and over half a year of rehabilitation, Xu Ping was finally able to walk outside, but he was so weak that he would pant after standing for a few minutes.

Wei Ying was dressed in a white wedding gown and was delivered to He Zhi by her dad.

The two stood before the altar, face to face, and He Zhi lifted up her veil.



The two smiled at each other.

“Mister He Zhi, in the name of the Holy Mother Mary, do you take Miss Wei Ying as your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do.”

“Miss Wei Ying, in the name of the Holy Mother Mary, do you take Mister He Zhi as your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.”

The priest asked the two to hold each other’s right hand.

“I, He Zhi, take you, Wei Ying, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, and will love you and honour you until death us do part.”

“I, Wei Ying, take you, He Zhi, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, and will love you and honour you until death us do part.”

“May the Lord in his goodness fill you both with his blessings. In the name of the Holy Mother Mary, I now declare you–”

The priest was interrupted by a cry, and everybody looked towards the source.

Police Chief Wei was bawling, and his wife was scolding him. “It’s a day of happiness. What is wrong with you?!”

Chief Wei retorted through his tears, “What the hell is wrong with me?! My damn daughter is getting married, and I feel horrible!” He pointed at He Zhi. “I’m warning you, He Zhi! Don’t think you can do whatever you like after taking *Xiao*-Ying! If you dare mistreat her, then I-then I…” Then he started panting, hands clasped to his chest.

His secretary quickly helped him back into his seat and rubbed at his chest while getting out medicine from his pocket.

“Please don’t get worked up, Chief Wei. Exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale…”

The crowd went crazy, and the newlyweds jumped down from the altar, the ceremony far from their minds, to look after her old man (his father-in-law).

Xu Ping nudged his brother.

“Let’s go.”

His brother helped him to his feet.

The guests all rushed forward leaving the last few rows nearly empty.

Xu Ping heard Wei Ying’s mother berating in a cracked voice, “You damn geezer don’t even know to talk properly! Look at you! You triggered your asthma! What kind of a father are you?!”

The chief then grumbled a retort, and the crowd burst out in guffaws.

Holding on to his brother, Xu Ping shuffled out of the main hall.

The corridors were dim, and the air smelled like old furniture.

Xu Ping suddenly stopped.

His brother turned to him.

“Laces came loose,” Xu Ping explained.

He was about to bend down, but his brother was ahead of him.

Around the corner of the corridor, the entrance to the church was wide open.

The sun burned bright in the August sky.

His brother straightened himself and grabbed his hand.
They shared a smile and stepped into the light.



End 完

Epilogue



I have many things to say but can't get them out at the moment.

Since I began writing *Brother* on December 30th last year, more than half a year has passed. I took a three-month break in the middle, too, but this story has finally come to an end.

This is the first long novel I've written. I've written *Reply*,[88] but excluding the extras it only counts as a medium-length novel.

I made two promises to myself before writing: one, I have to write according to my own wishes; two, I must finish it. I did it.

Through the process of writing *Brother*, I've become painfully aware that I've aged. Towards the end, I would flip back to the words I had written and feel ridiculous. Some sentences are like photographs, trapping the me at that moment in time in a strange method. Reading it felt as though I was having a conversation with the old me.

I feel glad but also sad.

I want to thank all the ladies who left me a comment. Without your support, I would have never finished this story.

I'm so tired. I think I need to take a nap now.

[88] Hui xin (回信), another story by the author.

Translator's notes

I think I'm tired too. This story was not technically difficult, but it was unexpectedly so full of emotion and conflict that I felt exhausted by the last chapter. Perhaps not every translator applies the same method as I, but I believe a true literary translator must devote themselves fully to the world and the characters, to every event, to every word and punctuation point.



I can't say that this is a common story, but I believe it is realistic enough for anyone to relate to it. Each book introduced us to a different period in China, a different Xu Ping and Xu Zheng, and a different relationship between them. The bond between the brothers is nearly impossible to define, in my opinion, and it is one thing that drew me in to this story.

I want to address something that has been gnawing at me for quite some time. It has to do with the title of this English translation. I sometimes regret choosing the English age-neutral term "brother" when the original title in Chinese, "didi," means younger brother. In the context of this story, that would refer to Xu Zheng, putting him at the centre of the plot. Yet, the transliterated term I used throughout the story was "gege," which I thought somewhat shifted the emphasis to Xu Ping. In my own defence, I chose to use "gege" directly because it is used as such in the story. Similarly, I used "xiao zheng" because that is the title that Xu Ping uses to call Xu Zheng. He would refer to Xu Zheng as "didi" only when speaking with a third person, and I used the English term "my brother" in those instances. Nonetheless, this bit bothered me to no end, and several times I wanted to go back and change every single "gege" to

“big brother.” But then I felt “big brother” didn’t feel as real as “gege,” so I never did change anything.

Anyways, before I start rambling, I want to thank my dear editor, Marcia, who is always so wise and helpful. I would also like to thank Anna for discussing (read: fangirling/fanboying over) the story with me and providing me with insight to improve my translation. The author, Ren Ti Gu Jia, was also kind enough to allow me to translate her work, and I hope she will like my work. Thank you to all the readers on our blog for your support and love. We will continue to translate and spread the goodness around the interwebs.



Until the next story,
ayszhang
February, 2017